

General care of the skin

This leaflet explains more about looking after genital skin.

If you have any further questions, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.

What is skin?

The skin is the largest organ in the body. It consists of three layers:

- The epidermis (outer layer) is further divided into layers, the deepest of which is constantly producing new cells. As they get older, the cells work their way to the surface where they die. The dead cells making up the outermost layer gradually fall off. We usually hardly notice this but it is estimated that the whole of the skin is replaced every three weeks.
- The dermis (middle layer) produces lubrication and oils that help with protection. This is the layer in which we find sweat glands and hair follicles.
- The subcutaneous layer is the innermost layer and it contains a quantity of fat which can be used for energy and/or insulation.

How is genital skin different?

Genital skin is particularly sensitive. It may react to a whole range of substances that may cause allergy or irritation, such as soap. In some instances, it may be only the penis/vulva that becomes irritated, as skin elsewhere may be more resistant.

Many skin diseases that occur elsewhere on the body can affect genital skin. Some diseases will only affect the genital skin.

Problems with genital skin are usually not related to sexually transmitted infections.

What is dry skin?

The skin relies on moisture to retain its elasticity and suppleness. When it becomes dry, it loses these important features. It becomes wrinkly and the epidermis becomes rough.

The skin maintains the balance between the internal environment of the body and the outside. If the body becomes dehydrated, the skin reflects this.

There are many causes of dry skin, which can occur without a medical condition being present. Examples of these are:

- dehydration – not drinking enough fluid
- fever – a raised temperature causes excess fluid loss and therefore dehydration
- alcohol – excess intake leads to dehydration
- coffee – excess leads to dehydration
- excessive washing which removes the natural oils that protect the skin.

How to manage dry skin

The recommendations below are general for all types of genital skin conditions and should be used in addition to the more specific treatment prescribed.

In general, avoid situations that lead to dehydration and make sure you drink a lot of fluids. It is important that you avoid over-the-counter preparations which can make your skin condition worse. You should also avoid perfumed products and deodorants.

Washing

- Stop using all soaps and bubble baths – wash only with an emollient (see below).
- Don't 'over wash'.
- You may find that adding oil to the bath water helps to prevent the skin from drying out.
- Regular use of moisturisers, at least twice a day, after bathing/showering and at other times of the day will both soften the skin and reduce itching. They can also help delay episodes of inflammation or reduce their severity.

Clothing

- Wear loose-fitting underwear and avoid synthetic fabrics.
- Avoid tight clothing such as cycling shorts or tight leggings.
- Sometimes not wearing any underwear can be helpful.

Emollients and moisturisers

These are products that moisturise (hydrate) and soften the skin, and help to restore the elasticity and suppleness. Simple non-perfumed emollients (for example Emulsifying Ointment and Diprobase) are available at chemist's shops and do not require a prescription. You can use them instead of soap for washing. This will leave the skin feeling less dry and irritated than using soap or water alone. The same creams can also be used anywhere on the body as a moisturiser. Frequent use is quite safe and even beneficial.

Useful sources of information

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

t: 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

To make comments or raise concerns about the Trust's services, please contact PALS. Ask a member of staff to direct you to the PALS office or:

t: 020 7188 8801 at St Thomas' t: 020 7188 8803 at Guy's e: pals@gstt.nhs.uk

Knowledge & Information Centre (KIC)

For more information about health conditions, support groups and local services, or to search the internet and send emails, please visit the KIC on the Ground Floor, North Wing, St Thomas' Hospital. t: 020 7188 3416

Language Support Services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch using the following contact details.

t: 020 7188 8815 fax: 020 7188 5953

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