

What You Need to Know About Psoriasis

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Psoriasis is an autoimmune disorder that causes scaling and inflammation of the skin. It can be seen in all ages but is usually found in adults. Most people grow new skin deep in their skin layer. This skin takes about a month to rise to the surface. Psoriasis causes this cycle to occur in just a few days. This means that cells rise up too fast and pile up on the surface. This pile-up can cause patches of thick red skin with silvery scales. These patches are often on elbows, knees, legs, scalp, lower back, face, palms, and feet. They can also appear on genitals, fingernails, toenails, and inside the mouth. Symptoms include pain, swelling, redness, and heat.

Psoriasis starts in the T-cells found in our immune system. T-cells help protect the body against infection and disease. In psoriasis, T-cells are called to action by mistake. This begins a chain reaction, leading to fast skin growth and other symptoms.

Psoriasis is hard to diagnose because it can look like other skin diseases. A doctor may have to look at a skin sample under a microscope to diagnose it.

Current psoriasis treatments

The goals of treating psoriasis are to stop the skin cells from growing so quickly and to remove scales and smooth the skin. There are three main types of treatments used. They are topical treatments, light therapy, and oral or injected medications.

Psoriasis treatment varies from person to person. Not all treatments work the same for everyone. Your doctor may switch treatments if you have a bad reaction or if a treatment no longer works.

Topical treatments

These are the most common and mildest treatments available. You probably started with this treatment before using medication. You can always use calamine lotion, take oatmeal baths, and use other products that contain aloe vera, jojoba, zinc pyrithione, or capsaicin. These help moisturize, soothe, remove scales, and relieve itching.¹ These products are inexpensive and available in grocery stores and drugstores.

Light therapy

This therapy includes both the sun and artificial light.

The simplest form is sunlight. Brief, daily exposures to small amounts of sunlight may improve psoriasis. However, intense sun exposure can worsen symptoms and cause skin damage. Artificial light treatments include ultraviolet light B (UVB) and ultraviolet light A, together with a drug called psoralen (PUVA). These treatments can be used to treat single patches, widespread psoriasis, and psoriasis that resists topical treatments. Side effects are generally short-term and may include redness, itching, and dry skin. Try using a moisturizer to help decrease these side effects.¹ Talk with your doctor to help you decide which options are best for you.

Oral or injected medications

Your doctor may prescribe oral drugs or injections if you have severe psoriasis. Because of their side effects, some of these drugs are only used for brief periods. They may also be used together with other forms of treatment.

- **Retinoids.** These drugs are related to vitamin A. The exact way they work in psoriasis is not known. Side effects may include lip inflammation and hair loss. These drugs can cause severe birth defects. Women must avoid pregnancy for at least three years after taking these drugs.
- **Methotrexate.** This drug can be taken by mouth or by injection. It helps decrease the creation of skin cells and lowers inflammation. Methotrexate is generally well tolerated in low doses. However, it may cause upset stomach, loss of appetite, and fatigue. When used for long periods, it can cause a number of serious side



effects, including severe liver damage. Your doctor may prescribe folic acid to help prevent these side effects.

- **Cyclosporine.** Cyclosporine suppresses the immune system. The way it works is similar to methotrexate. Like other related drugs, cyclosporine increases your risk of infection, cancer, and other health problems including kidney problems and high blood pressure. The risk increases with higher dosages and long-term therapy.
- **Apremilast.** Apremilast is prescribed under the brand name Otezla[®]. It works by helping to reduce inflammation. The most common side effects are diarrhea, headache, and nausea. Some patients have experienced more serious side effects like depression and unexplained weight loss. Be sure to speak with your doctor if any of these effects occur or become worse.
- **Injectable drugs.** Several injectable drugs known as biologics are approved for psoriasis. They include certolizumab (Cimzia[®]), secukinumab (Cosentyx[®]), etanercept (Enbrel[®]), adalimumab (Humira[®]), infliximab (Remicade[®]), golimumab (Simponi[®]), ustekinumab (Stelara[®]), risankizumab (Skyrizi[®]), guselkumab (Tremfya[®]), and ixekizumab (Taltz[®]). These drugs are given by intravenous infusion or subcutaneous injection. They are usually used for people who had little or no success with traditional therapy or who have psoriatic arthritis. They must be used with caution because they have strong effects on the immune system. In rare instances, they may lead to life-threatening infections. Often, people taking these drugs must be screened for tuberculosis and other infections.

¹ Psoriasis. MayoClinic. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/psoriasis/diagnosis-treatment/drc-20355845>.

- **Other medications.** Thioguanine and hydroxyurea are medications that can be used when other drugs cannot be given.

Taking drugs should help your symptoms. They are not a cure. Symptoms typically return after treatment stops. Check with your doctor or pharmacist if you think any drug may conflict with your treatment or other medications. Be sure to tell your doctor and your PerformSpecialty nurse if you develop an infection of any kind.

What you can do

There are some things you can do in addition to the plan ordered by your doctor. It's important to:

Get the best care possible. Talk with your doctor about all treatments available.

Learn about the disease. The more informed you are, the better.

Find support. Consider joining a support group to get tips from others.

Don't become discouraged. Finding the right combination of care and support may take time.

Try to reduce stress. Stress might make some skin conditions worse. Lowering your stress may help more than you think.

Keep your skin moisturized. Even changes in the weather can dry your skin, which will make your condition worse. Keep away from products that are harsh to your skin.

Try not to scratch and pick. This could lead to a tear in the skin and possibly infection and sores. Keep your nails short.

Listen to your body. Pay attention to any triggers that may worsen your symptoms. Don't ignore the signs your body may be giving you.

Nutritional education

There are no known "trigger foods" that affect everyone with psoriasis. However, several foods have been suspected.

Gluten. Recent studies show that people with psoriasis may be sensitive to gluten. Gluten is a protein found in wheat, barley, and rye. Avoiding gluten may ease your psoriasis symptoms.²

Foods that cause inflammation. Did you know that certain foods are known to cause inflammation? Here are a few foods to consider avoiding:

- **Dairy.** Psoriasis is a condition of inflammation, and high-fat dairy is commonly associated with inflammation.
- **Red meats.** Fatty red meats can also cause inflammation. Go for the leaner cuts instead.



- **Sugar and coffee.** These have been reported to worsen symptoms.
- **Alcohol.** Alcohol may affect psoriasis in men more than women. Men who are heavy drinkers have a lower response to treatment.³

Listen to your body. If some foods make your skin worse, stop eating them. Then see if your skin improves.

Smoking

Smoking may cause changes in the immune system, skin cell growth, and skin inflammation. Smoking may increase the severity of the disease.

Exercise

Being active is important for your overall health and wellness. This is especially true if you have psoriasis. People with psoriasis are at higher risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

Getting regular exercise can help you in other areas of your life, including:

- Giving you more energy.
- Maintaining your weight.
- Lowering your stress levels.

Exercise can also help improve your mood. If you are feeling down, staying active can help you improve these feelings.

Try to exercise and stay active as much as possible. Talk with your doctor to make sure your exercise plan is right for you.

² Dietary Modifications. National Psoriasis Foundation. <https://www.psoriasis.org/dietary-modifications>.

³ Smoking and Psoriasis. National Psoriasis Foundation. <https://www.psoriasis.org/advance/smoking-and-psoriasis>.



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