

Lichen sclerosis

Lichen sclerosis (LS) is a skin condition. It is more common in women after menopause, but it can happen to anyone at any age. LS usually affects the genital skin, but can affect any other area of skin. LS mostly occurs near the clitoris, on the labia and around the anus, or on the foreskin and the head of the penis.

What are the symptoms and signs of lichen sclerosis?

LS results in a white thickening of the skin. It can be localised to one area of the genitals or affect the whole area.

LS can cause:

- itching around the vulva and anal area
- skin splits which can cause bleeding and pain
- bruising and blood blisters
- painful sex
- the clitoris to disappear, the labia to shrink and the entrance to the vagina to become tight due to changes in the skin.
- the penis to become itchy, firm, and discoloured or white in appearance
- decreased sensation at the tip of the penis
- difficulty passing urine
- shrinking and tightening of the foreskin which can then become difficult to retract

When LS affects non-genital skin, white patches may be found on the inner thigh, buttocks, under the breasts, neck, shoulders and armpits.

What causes lichen sclerosis?

The cause of LS is unknown but may include genetic, hormonal and irritant factors. LS is thought to occur due to when the body's immune system attacks its own healthy skin cells (also known as an auto-immune process).

How is lichen sclerosis diagnosed?

Your health care provider will ask you about your symptoms and then examine you. You may be advised to have a biopsy of the skin (removal of a very small piece of skin under local anaesthetic) may be taken to confirm the diagnosis.

What is the treatment for lichen sclerosis?

Topical steroid ointments are used to treat LS. You will usually need to apply the ointment once a day initially. The itch will usually settle within a few days but it can take weeks or months for your skin to improve. Once your skin has improved your health care provider may reduce the strength of topical steroid ointment and may advise regular, long-term use to prevent further skin changes.

Gentle skin care can also help. Wash, shower or bathe with plain water or a non-soap cleanser. Try to avoid rubbing and scratching.

It is important to attend follow-up appointments with your health care provider. A check up once a year is usually recommended so that LS can be monitored after initial treatment.

What to expect?

The good news is that treatments are very effective. Most patients with LS who use treatment as prescribed have vast improvement in their symptoms.

Will I need surgery?

Surgery is rarely needed, unless skin shrinkage is causing difficulty during sex or when passing urine. Removal of the foreskin (circumcision) may be necessary in some cases.

What can happen if lichen sclerosis is not treated?

LS is associated with an increased risk of vulval and penile cancers. Studies have shown this risk is much lower if LS is well controlled. Long-term treatment and follow-up is therefore recommended.

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