

ITCHING

Itching without any underlying rash is a common problem and it manifests in a variety of ways. Sometimes it involves the entire body, but frequently it will be localized to the scalp, somewhere on the back, forearm, thigh or calf. The skin findings with itching are typically the result of scratching such as scratch marks, open sores, callus-like bumps, leathery skin with increased pigmentation or scratch related bruising.

The medical term for itching is pruritus. There are many possible causes for pruritus. Dry skin, medications, neurologic issues, liver disease and kidney disease are examples. Occasionally pruritus can be a symptom of a more serious illness such as lymphoma or other internal malignancies. In my experience, this probably represents less than 5% of the individuals who I see with pruritus. Infestations such as scabies or body lice will also cause itching, but eventually there are very visible signs of these issues. Some people with pruritus are simply very sensitive to minor stimuli such as dust, lint and clothing labels.

The evaluation of pruritus usually begins in the dermatologist's office with a careful history and physical examination. In some instances further evaluation with laboratory tests and even radiological studies are indicated. In spite of this, it is quite common for the cause to remain unknown. In such cases there are still treatments which will provide symptomatic relief.

When the cause of the pruritus is identified, treatment is directed at the underlying problem. In the absence of any identifiable underlying cause, treatment is directed at the symptoms. Providing relief for this challenging problem is as much art as science. It is not simply the ingredients that provide relief for the problem, but the proper use of the ingredients, as well as education and motivation of the patient that lead to treatment success. In my practice, after a thorough evaluation, institution of combinations of topical prescription and over the counter skin care products and occasionally oral medications, approximately 75% of chronically itchy patients will get significant relief.

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