



Lichen sclerosis

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

What causes lichen sclerosis?

The cause is unknown but may be linked to genes, hormones and irritation. It is thought to happen because your immune system is attacking its own healthy skin cells (also known as an auto-immune process).

What are the signs and symptoms of lichen sclerosis in the genitals?

The condition causes a white thickening of the skin. It can be in just one area of the genitals or affect the whole area.

It can cause:

- itching around your vulva and anal area
- skin splits which can cause bleeding and pain
- bruising and blood blisters
- painful sex
- the skin around your clitoris may tighten, your labia may appear smaller and constrict and the entrance to your vagina may become tight due to changes in your skin
- areas on the skin of your penis to become itchy, firm, and discoloured or white in appearance
- less sensation at the tip of your penis
- shrinking and tightening of your foreskin which can then become difficult to retract
- problems passing urine

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

How is lichen sclerosis diagnosed?

Your health care provider will ask you about your symptoms and examine you. They may suggest you have a biopsy of the skin, which involves the removal of a very small piece of skin under local anaesthetic. This skin is sent to a laboratory and tested to confirm the diagnosis.

What is the treatment for lichen sclerosis?



Steroid ointments that you put on your skin are used to treat lichen sclerosis. At the start of your treatment, you will usually need to put the ointment on once a day. The itch will usually settle within a few days; however 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. They might suggest you regularly use the ointment long term to prevent more skin changes.

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

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

The good news is that treatments are very effective. Symptoms will improve for most people when they follow the treatment their doctor recommends.

Will I need surgery?

Surgery is rarely needed and is only required if skin shrinkage is causing problems during sex or when passing urine. Removal of the foreskin (circumcision) may be needed in some cases.

What can happen if lichen sclerosis is not treated?

If you have lichen sclerosis, you have a higher risk of developing vulval or penile cancer. This risk is much lower if the condition is well controlled. For this reason, long-term treatment and follow-up is important.

If you need more information or have any questions, please contact the Canberra Sexual Health Clinic on (02) 5124 2184.

References:

DermNetNZ (2016) Lichen sclerosis. <http://dermnetnz.org/immune/lichen-sclerosus.html>

Melbourne Sexual Health Centre (2017) Lichen Sclerosus Factsheet

<https://www.mshc.org.au/SexualHealthInformation/SexualHealthFactSheets/LichenSclerosus/tabid/271/Default.aspx>

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