



Patient Information

Lichen Sclerosus

Lichen Sclerosus is a long-term skin disorder that most commonly affects the skin around the genitals. The skin develops severely itchy or sore white spots

What is Lichen Sclerosus?

Lichen Sclerosus is a relatively uncommon condition in which thin white crinkly patches appear on the skin. It can appear anywhere, but is most troublesome in the genital areas.

What causes Lichen Sclerosus?

The cause of Lichen Sclerosus is not known. Sometimes it is associated with diseases in which the body's immune system attacks normal tissues such as the thyroid gland (causing an over- or underactive thyroid gland) or the insulin-producing cells in the pancreas (causing diabetes).

Lichen Sclerosus can occur in either sex and at any site, but is more common in women, in whom the vulva is the most common site. Lichen Sclerosus can affect women of any age and may occasionally develop in girls prior to puberty. A similar process affects men and boys. Despite the tendency to affect genital skin, Lichen Sclerosus is not an infection - it is quite certain that the disease is not contagious, so sexual partners cannot pick it up.

Is Lichen Sclerosus hereditary?

Rarely Lichen Sclerosus can occur in relatives.

What are the symptoms of Lichen Sclerosus?

Many patients have none, but the most common symptom of Lichen Sclerosus is itch. As a rule the spots on the general skin surface seldom itch much, but those in the genital area do, and can also be sore if the skin breaks down or cracks. In the genital area, the scar-like process can tighten the skin, and this can interfere with sexual intercourse in affected women.

What does Lichen Sclerosus look like?

Women with Lichen Sclerosus in other areas of the body often have it on the vulva as well. Sometimes this causes no symptoms and they may not even know it is there. The white thin fragile areas surrounding the vulva and the anus in a figure of eight pattern have a crinkly surface; their fragility may lead to easy bruising and erosions. Later on, the



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inner lips of the vulva and its opening can shrink, leading to pain on intercourse, but this is unusual in most cases. Less often lichen Sclerosus can develop in young girls then get better at puberty.

How will Lichen Sclerosus be diagnosed?

The diagnosis of Lichen Sclerosus can usually be made from the typical appearance of the condition. However, Lichen Sclerosus can look a bit like vitiligo (though this has a normal skin texture) and Lichen Planus (which is more purple). If there is any doubt, the examination of a small specimen of skin (a biopsy) under the microscope will help.

What is the treatment for Lichen Sclerosus?

A strong steroid ointment or cream (topical) is the main treatment. It is usual to use the ointment or cream regularly for three months. A common plan is to use a single application at night for four weeks, followed by alternate nights for four weeks and then twice a week for four weeks. You must use the steroid as directed by your doctor. Keep on with treatment for as long as advised. Irritation tends to ease after two weeks or so, but the skin may take about three months of treatment to look and feel better.

The skin may return to normal if Lichen Sclerosis is diagnosed and treated with a topical steroid at an early stage. However, if the appearance of skin has already changed a lot, the changes may not reverse much with topical steroid treatment, even though symptoms of itch and soreness are often relieved. **Cortisone/steroid creams are extremely safe and effective for Lichen Sclerosus (LS).**

After the initial regular treatment for about three months, you may then only need to use the ointment or cream once or twice every 1-2 weeks to keep symptoms away.

General measures

Use a moisturising cream/ointment (emollient) instead of soap to clean the genital area. This is soothing. Avoid bubble baths, scented soap, detergents, perfumes, etc., to the genital skin (vulva) of women. These may irritate the skin and make symptoms worse. Lubricants are useful during sex if having sex is painful.

Lichen Sclerosus (LS) and cancer of the vulva

We know that patients with Lichen Sclerosus(LS)are at risk for vulval cancer. This is not a high risk but research shows that 2- 6% of untreated women with Lichen Sclerosus (LS) develop a cancer at some stage in their lives. It does appear however that treatment minimises this risk. vulval cancer looks like a lump or ulcer or a sore that doesn't heal. If you suspect you have Lichen Sclerosus(LS) and something like this develops, see your doctor right away.



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Further reading & References

- The management of Vulva Skin Disorders: Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (February 2011)
- Fistarol SK, Itin PH; Diagnosis and treatment of lichen sclerosus: an update. Am J Clin Dermatol.2013Feb; 14(1):27-47. Doi:10.1007/s40257-012-0006-4.
- Web site of British Association of Dermatologists (BAD).www.bad.org.uk/for-the-public/patient-information/lichen-sclerosus.

Contact us

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From 1st January 2019 smoking will not be permitted on any NHS site in England. Smoking will not be permitted within any of our buildings or anywhere outside on our sites. Smoking facilities will not be provided. Please be considerate of others when vaping in hospital grounds.

This information sheet is available to order in other languages and formats. If you would like a copy, please contact us on 01793 604031 or email gwh.pals@nhs.net

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