

Skin Rashes

There are many different types of skin rashes and many different causes of a skin rashes. Most skin rashes are harmless but some may need treatment from your doctor. Some rashes (especially dark red or purple rashes that don't fade with pressure) may need urgent medical treatment.

This leaflet is a guide but if you have any concerns, then you must telephone or see your GP, especially if:

- The rash doesn't quickly disappear.
 - You feel unwell.
 - The rash does not fade with pressure (the best way to test this is to press a glass gently against the rash to see if it fades).
 - You are not sure what has caused the rash or have any other concerns.
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How are skin rashes described?

Skin rashes can be described in the following way:

- Redness of the skin (called **erythema**)
- Flat abnormally coloured areas of skin (called **macules**). Macules are often either red, dark red or purple, brown or white
- Solid raised areas which are up to half a centimetre across (called **papules**)
- Solid raised areas which are more than half a centimetre across (called **nodules**)
- Areas of red raised skin (called **plaques**) and **scales**, which have a flaky silvery-white appearance
- Reddish-purple lesions which do not fade with pressure (called **purpura**):
 - If less than one centimetre across then these are called **petechiae**
 - If more than one centimetre across then they are called **ecchymoses**
- **Blisters**: these are swellings of the skin containing fluid:
 - If a blister is less than half a centimetre across then it is called a **vesicle**. If filled with yellow fluid (pus) then it is called a **pustule**
 - If a blister is larger than half a centimetre across it is called a **bullae** (plural is bullae)

What skin conditions often cause itching?

Skin conditions that can cause itching include (please click the links to separate leaflets which provide further information):

- [Dry skin.](#)
- [Eczema.](#)
- [Contact dermatitis.](#)
- [Urticaria.](#)
- [Lichen planus.](#)
- [Psoriasis.](#)
- [Folliculitis.](#)

What are the common causes of skin rashes?

Please click the links to separate leaflets which provide further information.

Red (erythema) but not scaly

- **Cellulitis** (skin infection).
- **Urticaria** (allergic reaction).
- Reaction to a medicine you are taking.
- **Burns**.
- **Viral rashes** - eg, **measles** or **German measles (rubella)**.
- **Vasculitis** (inflammation of blood vessels, which may occur with various illnesses, including **rheumatoid arthritis**).
- **Erythema nodosum**.
- Redness on the palms of your hands may be caused by liver disease, pregnancy or an **overactive thyroid gland (hyperthyroidism)**.
- A red rash may occasionally be due to an inflammatory condition called **systemic lupus erythematosus**, especially if it is on the cheeks.

Red (erythema) and scaly

- **Psoriasis**.
- **Eczema**.
- **Seborrhoeic dermatitis** (in adults) or **cradle cap** in babies.
- Fungal skin infection, such as **athlete's foot**, **tinea cruris (groin)**, **ringworm**, **scalp ringworm** or infection with **candida**.
- **Pityriasis rosea**.
- **Pityriasis versicolor**.
- **Lupus erythematosus**.
- **Lichen planus**.

Macules

- Red macules may be due to a reaction to a medicine or a **viral rash** - such as **measles** or **rubella** - as well as other causes.
- A brown macule may be a mole but check with your doctor if a mole changes or you are concerned it might be a **melanoma**.
- A white macule may be due to a condition which causes pale patches of skin (called **vitiligo**) or a skin complaint with flaky discoloured areas (called **pityriasis versicolor**).
- If a macule is dark red or purple and does not fade when you put pressure on it then it is a purpura (see below) and you need to see a doctor urgently.

Papules

- Common causes of papules include **acne**, **viral wart**, **seborrhoeic wart**, **molluscum contagiosum**, **scabies**, **insect bites** and skin tags.
- Other causes include **psoriasis**.

Purpura and petechiae

- These are dark red or purple and don't fade with pressure. You need to see a doctor urgently because there may be a serious cause that needs urgent treatment, such as **meningococcal infection**.
- However, common causes include injury to the skin or repeated coughing. More serious common causes include liver disease.
- Less common causes include vasculitis (eg, **Henoch-Schönlein purpura**) or a low level of platelets in your blood (eg, **idiopathic thrombocytopenia purpura**).

Nodules

- Common causes of a nodule include a **sebaceous cyst**, **lipoma**, **skin cancer**, or a wart.
- Other causes include rheumatoid nodules (associated with **rheumatoid arthritis**) and Heberden's nodes (associated with **osteoarthritis**).

Blisters

- Skin inflammation, including reactions to medicines, **contact dermatitis**, **eczema**. Eczema on the legs may be caused by varicose veins (**varicose eczema**).
- Diseases of the immune system - eg, **bullous pemphigoid**.
- Viral infections - eg, **chickenpox**, **hand, foot and mouth disease**.
- Skin infection: a germ (bacterial) infection with **impetigo** or viral infection with herpes simplex (**cold sores** or **genital herpes**) or **herpes zoster (shingles)**.
- Rarer causes include **pemphigus** and **pemphigoid**.

Pustules

- Skin infection by a virus (eg, **cold sores** due to herpes simplex virus) or bacteria (**impetigo**).
- Inflammation - eg, **psoriasis**.
- Pustular skin reaction to medicine you are taking.
- Pustules on the face may be **acne** or **rosacea**.

Ulcers

Ulcers may be due to **venous leg ulcers**, **pressure ulcers**, **diabetes skin ulcers** or **cancerous (malignant) skin ulcers**.

Further reading & references

- **DermIS (Dermatology Information System)**
- **DermNet NZ**
- **Ely JW, Seabury Stone M**; The generalized rash: part I. Differential diagnosis. *Am Fam Physician*. 2010 Mar 15;81(6):726-34.
- **Ely JW, Seabury Stone M**; The generalized rash: part II. Diagnostic approach. *Am Fam Physician*. 2010 Mar 15;81(6):735-9.

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