

DO YOU KNOW WHAT PSORIASIS IS?

December is a special month to celebrate the holidays and spend time with friends and family. However, for those with psoriasis, social gatherings during this time of year can cause frustration or embarrassment. Psoriasis is an uncomfortable, life-long skin disorder. In fact, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) estimates that this disease affects more than 5 million people in the United States.

OVERVIEW

Psoriasis is a chronic autoimmune disease that causes raised and inflamed patches on the skin. These patches will appear red or silvery and most commonly affects the skin on the outside of the elbows, knees, or scalp. It can also show up on other parts of the body. These thick skin patches can be itchy and painful. They can also make one feel self-conscious about their appearance. The good news is there have been many medication developments in the past decade which are providing more treatment options than ever before.

CAUSES

The exact cause of psoriasis is unknown. It is believed the disease develops from a combination of factors. Potential factors include:

- **Immune** – An overactive immune system causes skin cells to rapidly build and pile up. Normal skin cells take a month to grow. With psoriasis, the cells grow in a matter of days.
- **Genetic** – Several genes have been shown to make people more likely to develop psoriasis. About one-third of people with psoriasis have other family members who also have the disorder.
- **Environmental** – Certain triggers, such as medications or smoking, can cause worsened symptoms or flare ups. Other triggers include stress, weather, injury, or infections.

SYMPTOMS

Psoriasis can appear in many different ways. Symptoms depend on disease type and severity. Most types of psoriasis go through cycles of flaring for a few weeks, then subsiding. It is not infectious or contagious. Some common symptoms are listed below.

- Areas on the skin that are red with raised patches
- Dry, cracked, or flakey silvery scales
- Burning, stinging, or itching
- Swollen, stiff, or painful joints
- Thickened or ridged nails

DIAGNOSIS

There is no single test or tool used to diagnose psoriasis. Doctors, such as skin specialists or dermatologists, can usually tell by looking at the skin. They can also examine a

sample of affected skin, called a biopsy. Make sure to contact your physician if you suspect you have psoriasis, or develop a rash that does not go away.

TREATMENT

There is no cure for psoriasis. Treatments that are available focus on managing symptoms. Treatment options often depend on the type and severity of psoriasis. These options can include both medications and light therapy. Light therapy and medications applied directly to the skin are usually used for milder psoriasis. These treatments are also effective if the affected area is limited to a small part on the body. For more widespread or larger areas, oral or injectable medications are often used. More information is listed here on the three main types of psoriasis treatments:

- **Topical treatment** – Topical medications are applied directly on top of the skin's surface. There are many types of topical formulations. They work to slow the growth of skin cells where symptoms appear. Examples include creams, ointments, gels, or foams. Topical remedies can be used alone or in combination with light therapy or oral medications.
- **Light therapy** – Light therapy uses natural or artificial light and shines it directly on the skin plaques. They work on the surface of the skin to help slow the growth of the affected skin cells. It is typically administered by a doctor. Examples include sunlight, ultraviolet laser, and ultraviolet A or B phototherapy.
- **Oral or injected medications** – These medications are taken by mouth or injection. They are reserved for moderate or severe cases of psoriasis. Some of these medications target specific parts of the immune system to slow down the number of skin cells being made. They may also require monitoring of blood or liver tests.

Some skin conditions can be serious or even life-threatening. If your symptoms worsen or do not improve with treatment, you may need to switch to something different. It is important to work with your physician to determine the best possible treatment course for you.