

Investigating lichen sclerosis and cracked feet

Learn more, live better. A Canadian dermatologist answers your questions.

Q I have white patches around my genitals that are itchy and painful, and the skin often tears and bleeds. What is this and can I get rid of it?

A This sounds like a condition called lichen sclerosis (also known as lichen sclerosis et atrophicus), which is a chronic skin disorder that can affect the genital and perianal areas of both men and women. However, research shows that lichen sclerosis is much more common in women, especially those older than 50 years. The patches can be itchy, but can also be asymptomatic.

The pain, tearing and scarring of lichen sclerosis can be very distressing. Unfortunately, as with many dermatological disorders, treatment can be challenging. In addition, a cause for lichen sclerosis has not yet been identified.

Medical management and monitoring are extremely important. Lichen sclerosis is a chronic condition, and over time the tearing and scarring can affect urination or sex. Very rarely there can be cancerous changes. If a lesion does not heal or remains open then it must be examined or biopsied for possible malignancy.

Current treatments include powerful topical steroids or calcineurin inhibitors and the use of gentle, non-soap cleansers. On occasion, but not often,

systemic treatments (pills) are prescribed. If you think you might have lichen sclerosis, see a dermatologist. If you would like to connect with others who have the same condition, visit skinergy.ca—it's a confidential, closed group.

Q My feet are dry and cracked, and often bleed. It sometimes hurts when I walk. Am I at risk of infection?

A Cracked heels and heel fissures are very common concerns that affect people from all walks of life. Most of the time they just seem a nuisance, but sometimes the cracks or fissures become deeper and bleed and cause pain when a person walks or stands up. There might be a fungal infection, so a scraping skin test should be performed to make sure there are no secondary concerns. If there is a fungal infection then topical antifungal therapy should help clear things up.

Sometimes dermatitis will cause cracking and bleeding, or this could even be a case of psoriasis. In this instance, topical steroid creams or ointments can help control the inflammation, cracks and, of course, the discomfort. General infection is uncommon unless you have diabetes. Those with diabetes are at increased risk of a secondary infection if bacteria



get into the cracks and cause cellulitis.

The treatment for cracked and fissured heels usually consists of regularly applying moisturizing creams, which may contain urea, salicylic acid, ceramides or even alpha-hydroxy acids. Applying ointments under socks can also be helpful, especially if the ointment is used overnight until the feet are healed. **CS**

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