

Vulvar Itching and Scratching: Lichen Simplex Chronicus

What is the itch-scratch cycle?

Vulvar itching can be caused by many different health conditions or skin irritants. A normal response to itching is to scratch or rub the skin. While this may bring relief and feel good for a moment, it also irritates the skin and can cause more itching. The itching can cause you to scratch or rub your vulva while you are asleep. This **itch-scratch cycle** can go on for so long that the original cause of the itching can be hard to remember or identify. These are some of the causes:

Health conditions:

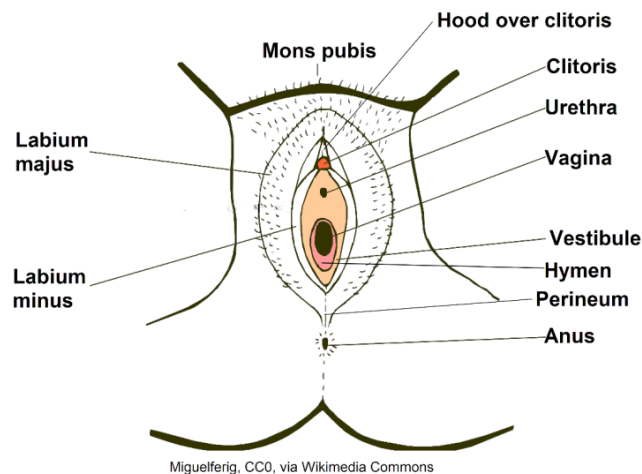
- Eczema
- Psoriasis
- Lichen sclerosus
- Anxiety
- Yeast or fungal infections
- Postmenopausal lack of estrogen
- Lichen planus
- Depression

Skin irritants:

- Urine (pee)
- Stool (poop)
- Wet bathing suits
- Sweat-soaked clothing
- Dyed underwear
- Spermicides
- Neomycin (in antibiotic creams)
- Scented laundry detergent or softener
- Scented toilet tissue, pads, or tampons
- Frequent cleaning with baby wipes
- Frequent washing with soap
- Adhesives in pads or pantliners
- Vaginal lubricants
- Benzocaine (in anti-itch creams or numbing creams)

What is the vulva?

The **vulva** is the part of the body that includes all the external (outside the body) genital parts. It covers the area from where pubic hair grows (the **mons pubis**) to the opening that stool comes out of (the **anus**). The vulva includes the large outer lips of skin (**labia majora**), small inner lips of skin (**labia minora**), the clitoris, the opening that urine comes out of (**urethra**), and the opening to the vagina.



What is lichen simplex chronicus (LSC)?

Lichen simplex chronicus (LSC) is an area of thickened skin caused by repeated rubbing and scratching from the itch-scratch cycle. It is the result of months or years of untreated or poorly treated itching. It often involves the skin on the hood over the clitoris, labia majora, and **perineum** (area of skin between the vagina and anus).

What are the symptoms of LSC?

- Along with itching, there may be slight bleeding, burning, or soreness caused by scratching.
- There may be a rash.

- Vulvar skin color is often red from **chronic inflammation** (long-lasting redness, heat, swelling, and pain).
- Thickened patches of skin from LSC may be white or gray.

How is LSC diagnosed?

The first step is to diagnose and treat any conditions that may be causing LSC.

To do this, we may need to:

- Swab the skin with a cotton swab or Q-tip® (called taking a **culture**) to send to the lab for to check for a bacterial or yeast infection.
- Remove a small piece of skin for lab testing (called a **biopsy**). We only do this if you are not improving from your treatment. You will get an injection of numbing medicine before the skin is removed.
- Refer you to an **allergist** (a professional that will check to see what allergies you may have through a method called patch testing).

How is LSC treated?

Medications

It is important that you continue taking all the medication that you prescribed as instructed by your healthcare provider, even if you start feeling better. Some types of medications that we may prescribe are listed below:

- **Oral** (taken by mouth) **antihistamine medications** (to help with deep sleep to prevent itching while sleeping)
 - Examples include diphenhydramine (Benadryl®) or hydroxyzine.
- **Tricyclic antidepressant medications** (to help with deep sleep)
 - Examples include amitriptyline (Elavil®).
 - When starting these medications, we will give you a schedule for slowly increasing the dose you take.
 - Do not skip doses. You must take this medication every day for 3-6 weeks before you will feel its full effect.



- If you decide to stop taking this medication, do not stop taking it all at once. Contact us and we will give you a schedule for slowly decreasing your doses before stopping completely.
- **Anticonvulsant medications** (to help with deep sleep and to calm the nerves of the vulva to decrease itching)
 - Examples include gabapentin (Neurontin®).
 - When starting these medications, we will give you a schedule for slowly increasing the dose you take.
 - Do not skip doses. You must take this medication every day for 3-6 weeks before you will feel its full effect.
 - If you decide to stop taking this medication, do not stop taking it all at once. Contact us and we will give you a schedule for slowly decreasing your doses before stopping completely.
- **Topical steroid ointment** (to help with itching and inflammation)
 - We usually start treatment with clobetasol, a strong steroid ointment.
 - You will put a pea-size amount on 2 times a day. Over time, as your symptoms (itching, burning, pain, etc.) decrease, you will switch to using it once a day. If your symptoms don't get worse, you will then be switched to a weaker steroid ointment.
 - This whole process takes months. If you stop the steroid ointment too soon, the itch-scratch cycle may come back.
- **Steroids** (can help get your symptoms under better control)
 - You may be prescribed oral steroids (taken by mouth) or we may recommend a steroid injection (shot) that we'll give you in the office.
- **Antibiotics**
 - Some antibiotics can help reduce inflammation. We may recommend this along with your other medications.
- **Yeast infection medication**

- We may test you for a yeast infection (by taking a culture). If you have one, we'll give you medication to treat this infection.

Other treatments

- **Comfort measures:** Comfort measures are things you can do to decrease irritation, itching, and pain to your vulva. We have created a handout with information on comfort measures that you can read online at: bit.ly/MM-ComfortMeasuresVulvarDisease.
- You can prevent skin damage from scratching by cutting your fingernails very short and wearing cotton gloves over your hands while you are sleeping.

Where can I find more information on vulvar itching and scratching?

| Resource | QR code |
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| DermNet™ NZ was started in 1996 by a group of dermatologists from New Zealand. It has become a world-wide resource of skin disease information. dermnetnz.org/topics/lichen-simplex-of-the-vulva |  |
| International Society for the Study of Vulvovaginal Disease www.issvd.org/resources/genital-itch-for-women |  |

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