Psoriasis of the Vulva

What is psoriasis?

Psoriasis is a skin disease with chronic inflammation that is caused by an overactive immune system. The exact cause is not known, but may include a disorder in your genes that was passed to you from your parents. Trigger(s) that are known to start or worsen psoriasis include:

- Emotional stress
- Skin injury
- Infections
- Medications:
  - Antimalarials
  - Inderal
  - Lithium
  - Quinidine

Psoriasis is not an infection. It is not something you can catch from someone else and you cannot give it to others by touching them.

What is the vulva?

The vulva (see below) is the part of the body that includes all the external female genital parts from where pubic hair grows (mons pubis) to the opening that stool comes out of (anus). In between are the large outer lips (labia majora), small inner lips (labia minora), clitoris, the opening that urine comes out of (urethra), and the opening to the vagina (vestibule).
Most women with psoriasis of the vulva also have it on other parts of their body, but about 5% (1 out of 20) have it only on the vulva.

**What are the symptoms?**

**Plaque psoriasis** causes thick, raised, red or gray-colored patches with silvery or white scales that often itch. Skin grows more fast than normal and sometimes the thickened patches get painful cracks.

Another type of psoriasis, called **inverse psoriasis**, is often seen on the vulva and in the creases between the thighs and the vulva. On other parts of the body it occurs in skin folds such as underarms and under breasts. The skin is red-colored and is smooth (no scales). It can be worsened by sweat or rubbing of skin against skin.
How is it diagnosed?
Often a diagnosis is made based on the way your vulva looks to the health care provider performing your exam. Finding psoriasis on other parts of your body helps confirm the diagnosis. Sometimes, a biopsy is done to make a definite diagnosis. A **biopsy** involves removing a small piece of skin for laboratory diagnosis. You will get an injection of numbing medicine before the skin is removed.

How is it treated?
There are different kinds of treatment for psoriasis of the vulva. Your treatment will depend on the severity of your disease. We will work with you to make a plan that works best for you. Psoriasis is a chronic illness so you may need some form of treatment for the rest of your life.

**Comfort measures**
To help relieve symptoms, follow the comfort measures described in:
- “Comfort measures for all diseases: what you can do to prevent vulvar irritation and itching” section of the Vulvar Diseases booklet: [http://www.med.umich.edu/1libr/Gyn/VulvarDiseasesBooklet.pdf](http://www.med.umich.edu/1libr/Gyn/VulvarDiseasesBooklet.pdf)

Thick, unscented ointments or creams such as petroleum jelly or Eucerin® cream will reduce scaling and cracking.

**Treat infections**
Cracked skin from psoriasis increases your risk of a getting a yeast or bacterial infection. We will check for this and give you topical or oral medicine if needed.
Topical medication is something that is applied to the skin, like a cream or ointment. Oral medication is something that is swallowed such as a tablet or capsule.

Topical steroid treatment
We will give you a daily schedule for using a topical steroid ointment. It is very important to continue treatment on this schedule even if itching or other symptoms stop. The symptoms you feel will stop before the inflammation is well-treated.

After your symptoms have stopped and we have seen on exam that your vulvar skin has responded to treatment, we will give you a schedule for ongoing treatment.

Other treatments
We will coordinate with your dermatologist to develop a plan if you need more complex treatment.

Other treatment options include:
- Topical medicines that target a specific part of the immune system (often called biologics)
- Methotrexate
  - First used as a cancer treatment but found to work well for psoriasis
  - Requires careful monitoring of your blood count and liver function
- Shots (injections) of medicines that target the immune system (biologics)

Resources
- “Genital Psoriasis” (National Psoriasis Foundation):
  https://www.psoriasis.org/genitals/

The National Psoriasis Foundation (NPF) is a non-profit organization with a
mission to drive efforts to cure psoriatic disease and improve the lives of those affected.

- “Genital psoriasis” (Dermnet NZ): https://dermnetnz.org/topics/genital-psoriasis