

## Department of Genitourinary Medicine

# Patient Information

The Information Standard 

# Information

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## Lichen Sclerosus

Lichen sclerosus is a skin condition affecting the genital area. The skin becomes inflamed, fragile, and scarred. It is most common in adult women but can occur in both sexes and all age groups; in men the condition is also called balanitis xerotica obliterans (BXO).

### What causes lichen sclerosus?

The cause is not known. It sometimes runs in families, along with autoimmune diseases such as thyroid gland problems. The condition cannot be passed on to sexual partners.

### What are the symptoms of lichen sclerosus?

Usually the condition only affects the skin of the vulva, anus, or penis. This can cause:

- itching
- soreness - especially with intercourse
- cracking of the skin
- scarring and tightening of the foreskin in males

### How is lichen sclerosus diagnosed?

- An experienced doctor may be able to diagnose the condition by its appearance.
- Sometimes they will take a biopsy to confirm it. This involves cutting out a small sample of skin tissue under a local anaesthetic. As at the dentist, the initial injection stings, but following that the procedure is painless. It usually heals within a week.

### How is lichen sclerosus treated?

Although there is no cure for the condition, it can be controlled and the symptoms relieved, as is the case with many other skin conditions such as eczema. The condition may burn itself out after some years.

### Self help:

- Avoid irritants, such as bubble bath and scented soaps - use a soap substitute, e.g. emulsifying ointment.
- Moisturise the genital skin daily with a bland moisturiser, e.g. Unguentum M.
- Use extra lubrication during intercourse.
- Keep cool - avoid tights and tight clothes.

## Medical treatment:

- The best treatment is with a strong steroid cream or ointment, usually clobetasol propionate (Dermovate)
- The leaflet that comes with the clobetasol advises you not to apply it to the genital skin. Ignore this; steroid creams or ointments can be used on genital skin with specialist recommendation.
- Use it once or twice daily (applying it a few minutes after the moisturiser) for 3 months, to control the condition; after this use is as and when required; usually just once or twice a week to keep symptoms away.
- Many people use too little clobetasol, due to worry about side effects of steroids. However if you use more clobetasol to start with, the lichen sclerosus will be more rapidly brought under control, and in the long term you will not need to use as much. If one 30g tube lasts for 3 months, you are not using too much.
- The skin may return to normal if lichen sclerosus is diagnosed and treated with a steroid cream or ointment at an early stage. However, if the appearance of the skin has already changed a lot, the changes may not reverse much with the steroid treatment, even though symptoms of itch and soreness are often relieved.

## Follow-up:

- Very rarely a skin cancer can develop in areas of long-standing chronic inflammation.
- Your doctor will usually keep you under review as long as you have symptoms.
- If you develop an ulcer or growth, you must consult your doctor without delay.

## Further information

Further information can be obtained from:

Department of Genitourinary Medicine  
The Park Centre for Sexual Health  
Weymouth Community Hospital  
Melcombe Avenue  
Weymouth  
Dorset DT4 7TB

To book an appointment please call: 01305 762 682