

Department of Genitourinary Medicine
Patient Information



The Information Standard 

Information

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Lichen planus

Lichen planus is a fairly common skin condition which can also affect the genital area and mouth. The appearances vary; purplish lumps (papules) on the skin, white streaks on the genitals and inside the mouth, and sores (erosions) on the genitals can all be seen. It mainly occurs in adults over 40 years old; genital lesions are more obvious in men.

What causes lichen planus?

- The cause is not known for certain. It is thought to be due to an overreaction of the skin's immune system provoked by a viral infection or a drug. Inflammatory cells seem to mistake the skin cells as foreign and attack them.
- The condition is not contagious so will not be passed on to others.

What are the symptoms of lichen planus?

- You may notice purplish lumps (papules) or white lacy streaks on the penis or vulva. They are often very itchy
- Mouth lesions rarely cause symptoms
- Erosive lichen planus is a rare form which can affect the vulva and vagina in women. It usually presents with pain and itching, and an unpleasant vaginal discharge
- It may cause pain during intercourse, and scarring can develop

How is lichen planus diagnosed?

- An experienced doctor may be able to diagnose the condition by its appearance
- Sometimes a biopsy is taken to confirm a diagnosis. 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 planus treated?

- Although there is no cure for the condition, it can often be controlled and the symptoms relieved
- Papular lesions often resolve after one or two years, even without treatment, but erosive lesions are usually more persistent

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 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 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 planus 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.

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