

# Itching or Dry Skin

## Helpful hints from the pharmacist

If you can't stop the underlying cause of itching, there are medicines to reduce the symptom of itching. Remember, such treatments only cover up the feeling of itching—they do not cure it.

Lotions, creams and ointments are often effective for mild to moderate itching and dry skin. Moisturizing products such as Eucerin™ cream or Aveeno Oatmeal Bath™ are generally safe and effective for dry, itchy skin.

Benedryl comes in a cream for putting on your skin. It has some mild local anesthetic effect. It may help in treating itchy skin while avoiding the side effects of oral antihistamines.

If creams do not work, oral antihistamines are available which may help to treat itching. This assumes that this is the cause of the itching, which may not be the case.

Antihistamines can cause side effects such as drowsiness, dry mouth, retaining urine and constipation. Sometimes antihistamines are the only treatment that may reduce itching. Check with your doctor before taking antihistamines.

## Cortisone cream

Finally, topical steroid (cortisone creams) can treat skin rashes. Low-strength hydrocortisone cream is available without a prescription. Serious side effects can be associated with long-term use. Any steroid should only be used after checking with your doctor.

## Keep your phosphorus down!

Check your phosphorus values regularly to see if there is a pattern of high values. Try to keep your phosphorus level below 6.0.

You can do this by limiting milk and foods made from milk to one serving a day. Be sure to take your phosphate binders as prescribed. Check with your pharmacist, dietitian, nurse or doctor for other helpful ideas.

Your dietitian: \_\_\_\_\_  
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Itching is not just a minor nuisance. It can make you miserable.

The cause of itchy or dry skin in people with kidney disease is not fully known. It may be caused by a high phosphorus level, but it is probably due to a lot of things.



## Here are some causes of itching.

Circle the ones you think might apply to you, and talk with your doctor, pharmacist or dietitian about them.

### 1. Skin dryness

Healthy skin stays moist from oils secreted by glands. Perspiration from your sweat glands also moistens your skin. Both kinds of glands tend to waste away and produce less with kidney disease, making skin more dry. Dry skin can aggravate other conditions and make itching worse.

### 2. Pigments

Pigments give color to your skin, organs and blood. When excreted they make urine yellow-gold in color. In kidney disease, pigments are kept in your body fluids and skin. You can see this in light-skinned dialysis patients who develop a yellow-brown or bronze tint to their skin. These pigments may irritate the nerve endings in the skin.

### 3. Uremic toxins

Just as pigments build up, other toxic substances build up in kidney disease. They may irritate nerve endings in the skin. Many kinds of toxins build up with kidney disease, but no one knows which causes itching.

### 4. Calcium phosphate

In kidney disease your phosphorus gets higher because your kidneys can't excrete it. When calcium and phosphate combine, they form crystals that deposit in your skin. This irritates your nerves and causes itching.

### 5. High PTH

Your parathyroid gland makes more parathyroid hormone (PTH) when calcium in your blood gets too low. A side effect of a high PTH is that certain cells multiply rapidly in your skin. These cells release histamine, which causes itchiness.

### 6. Allergies

Allergic reactions to heparin, dialyzer membranes or medications can also cause histamine release.

### 7. Vitamin A

Kidney patients usually have high vitamin A levels. Healthy people with this imbalance also feel itchy. It is possible that too much vitamin A makes itchiness worse in kidney patients.

### 8. High magnesium

Magnesium may build up in kidney disease. Magnesium binds with phosphate and forms a crystal that acts the same as calcium-phosphate. (see #4)

## Tips for itching

### 1. Above all, don't scratch!

Scratching hard can actually tear your skin. Dialysis patients often have many small wounds all over their bodies from scratching. These can get easily infected and lead to serious problems.

### 2. If you itch, try slapping lightly instead of scratching. It gives relief without tearing your skin.

3. Soap can dry out your skin and also cause irritation and itching. Try a soap made for sensitive skin, or try taking your bath or shower without soap.

4. Oatmeal baths are often very soothing. Tie up a handful of oatmeal in a cotton cloth. Boil it as you would normally cook oatmeal. Use this cloth bundle as a sponge in a luke-warm bath. You can buy oatmeal bath products, such as Aveeno.

5. Sometimes laundry detergents can cause more skin irritations if you have small wounds. Try a new brand and see if it helps. Avoid detergents with enzymes.