

I Can't Stop Itching!

Itching: It's not just a minor nuisance. The cause of itchy skin in people with kidney disease is not fully known. It may be caused by high phosphorus, but it is probably due to a lot of things.

Here are some causes of itching:

- 1) **Skin dryness:** Healthy skin stays moist from oils secreted by your glands. Perspiration from your sweat glands also moistens your skin. Both of these kind of glands tend to waste away and produce less with kidney disease, making the skin more dry. Dry skin can aggravate other conditions and make itching more likely.
- 2) **Pigments:** Pigments are substances that give our skin, organs and blood, color. They are excreted by healthy kidneys and make urine yellow-gold in color. In kidney disease, they 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 toxins cause itching.
- 4) **Calcium phosphate:** The balance of calcium and phosphate is ruined in kidney disease. Your phosphorus gets higher because your kidneys can't get rid of 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. Kidney patients may have more histamine released simply because they have more of these cells.
- 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 get 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. Magnesium may also cause the release of histamine.

Tips for Itching:

- 1) Above all, **DON'T SCRATCH!!!** Scratching hard can 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.

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

- 2) Soap can dry out your skin and also cause irritation and itching. Try a soap made for sensitive skin. Try taking your bath or shower without soap.

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 lukewarm bath. Oatmeal bath products, such as Aveeno can also be purchased.

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

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. Moisturizing products such as **Eucerin Cream or Aveeno Oatmeal Bath**, are generally safe and effective for dry, itchy skin.

Benedryl comes in a cream form for putting on your skin. It has some mild local anesthetic activity and 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 histamine release is the cause of the itching, which may not be the case. Antihistamines can cause unpleasant side effects such as drowsiness, dry mouth, urine retention and constipation

Sometimes antihistamines are the only treatment that may reduce itching to tolerable levels. Both nonprescription and prescription products are available. Your doctor should always be consulted before you take any oral antihistamines.

Finally, topical steroid (**cortisone creams**) are available to treat skin rashes. Lowstrength **Hydrocortisone Cream** is available without a prescription. Because there are serious side effects 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 to high values. Try to keep your phosphorus level below 6.0.

You can do this by limiting milk foods to 1 serving a day and taking your phosphate binders as prescribed. Check with your pharmacist, dietitian, nurse or doctor for other helpful ideas.