

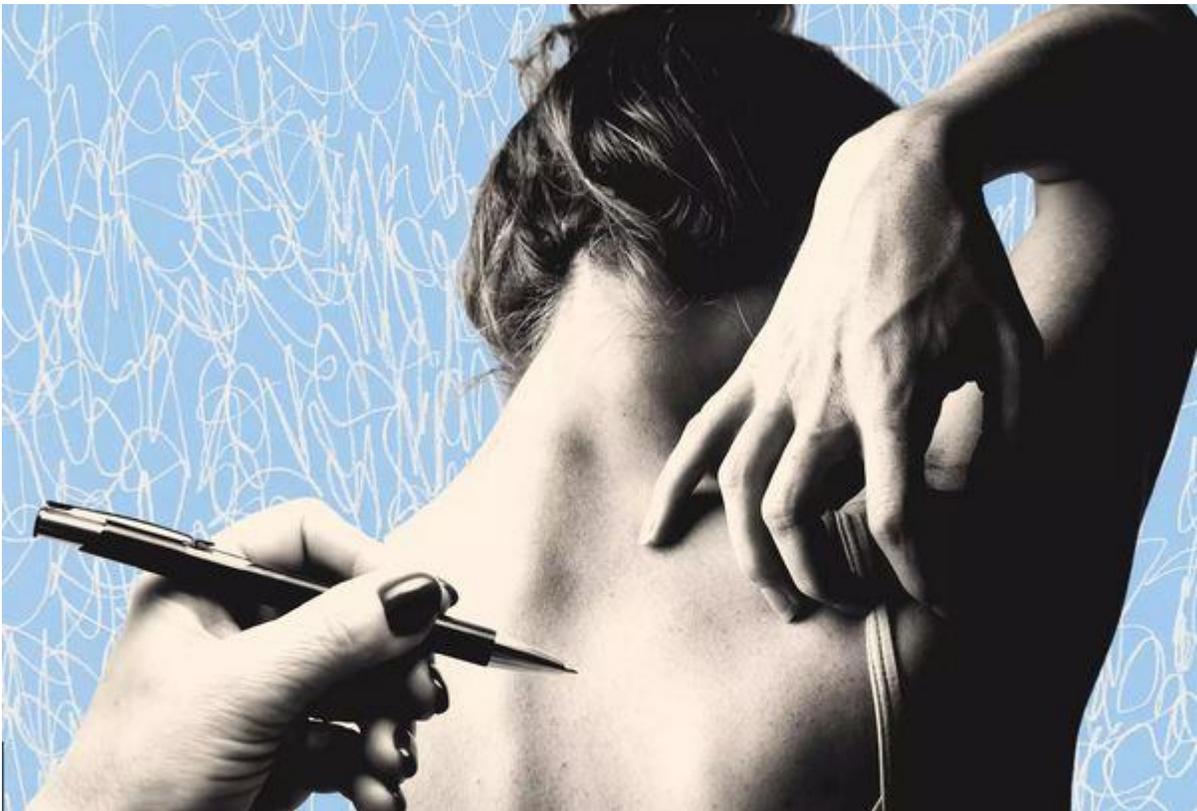
Dermatographia Aka Skin Writing May Be Causing What You Thought Were Hives

A somewhat common skin condition, dermatographia can lead to temporary red, raised lines where you've been lightly scratched.



By **Korin Miller**

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Any time you scratch your skin, you'll probably expect to see a little redness in the spot you just itched. But, if you develop raised, red marks that linger around, you'll probably have some questions about exactly what's going on.

If that scenario resonates, you're not alone. You may have been experiencing a symptom of a medical condition called dermatographia (skin writing in common parlance). And, yeah, while it may seem cool to be able to draw little designs on your body using your finger (yes, dermatographia art is a thing), it can be uncomfortable to experience the condition.

Here's what you need to know about the condition, including the most common dermatographia triggers and treatment options.

What Is Dermatographia?

"Dermatographia is a fairly common condition in the hives family," says board-certified dermatologist Ife J. Rodney, M.D., founding director of Eternal Dermatology Aesthetics and professor of dermatology at Howard University and George Washington University. When someone with dermatographia lightly scratches their skin, the scratches turn red and form raised welts that look like hives.

Worth noting: It's not just scratching that can cause these marks. Light strokes and "any type of friction" can cause a reaction in some people with dermatographia, says Dr. Rodney. "The scratches will adopt whatever shape you made and will stick around for a short period," she says. (Read: usually for no longer than 30 minutes, according to the Mayo Clinic.)

Dermatographia impacts up to five percent of the population, according to the Cleveland Clinic. It can affect anyone, although people with dry skin, those with dermatitis (a type of skin inflammation), people with a family history of the condition, and people in their teens or 20s are the most likely to be impacted. "It can feel very itchy or uncomfortable or even tingle, and severe cases can become unbearable," says Dr. Rodney. (Related: [Here's Why You Have Itchy Skin At Night](#))

Dermatographia can arise in flares (meaning you're prone to the symptoms for a period of time), according to Dr. Rodney. "Some people may experience it daily, others weekly, some lasting several months," she says. "Some may have flare-ups at specific times of the year such as winter or while performing certain activities." It's tough for doctors to predict if a case will go away after one flare or not, she says. And cases of dermatographia can come back again under certain circumstances such as when you have an infection or compromised immune system, points out Dr. Rodney.

Dermatographia Causes

The exact cause of dermatographia isn't known, but it's thought to be an immune response, says New York-based board-certified dermatologist [Gary Goldenberg, M.D.](#), founder of Goldenberg Dermatology. Common dermatographia triggers include allergies, heat, exercise, cold, certain medications, stress, or vibrations, according to the Cleveland Clinic. (If you're confused by that last one, it refers to being near to something that's vibrating. "Vibratory sensations can cause mast cells to release histamine, causing [dermatographia]," says Dr. Goldenberg.)

There's also some research to suggest that the COVID-19 vaccine may cause dermatographia in some people. "I have seen this several times in my practice," says Dr. Goldenberg. "Patients can have a hive reaction at the site of the vaccine injection or all over the body. I have seen this persist for several months after the shot."

There is a precedence for this, says Dr. Rodney. "In the past, what the dermatology community has noticed is that some people who have recently recovered from an infection, like the cold or flu, may develop dermatographia," she explains. "So it's not outside the realm of possibility that vaccines like the COVID vaccine can cause a similar reaction." After all, the vaccines are designed to trigger an immune response. "As is the case with the other side effects of COVID and the vaccine, we cannot yet explain the exact reason it occurs," says Dr. Rodney. (Related: [Should You Mix COVID-19 Vaccines? Here's What Experts Are Saying](#))

Common Dermatographia Treatments

Most people with dermatographia don't seek treatment, according to the Mayo Clinic. And, if your dermatographia doesn't cause you any discomfort, it's harmless to leave the condition untreated, says Dr.

Goldenberg. But, if you *are* uncomfortable, "most cases respond well to antihistamines" (think: OTC options such as Benadryl), says Dr. Rodney.

Avoiding your dermatographia triggers (if you can figure them out) may help too, says Dr. Goldenberg. That means avoiding hot showers, wearing loose clothes, and reducing stress can be helpful if any of those give you issues, says Dr. Rodney.

If your dermatographia lasts for more than two weeks, reach out to a dermatologist to get evaluated, recommends Dr. Goldenberg. And, if you don't have any improvement in your symptoms after taking an OTC antihistamine or you're having pain and uncomfortable itching, see your doctor immediately, says Dr. Rodney. "We can recommend other antihistamines, biologics, or allergy medication to keep things at bay," she says. "It can take quite some time to see an improvement, so patience and consistency is key."