

Psoriasis: 6 important facts about this common skin condition

Korin Miller

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Psoriasis, which isn't contagious, is an often misunderstood skin condition. (Photo: Getty Images)

About 7.5 million Americans have psoriasis. But, despite psoriasis being a fairly common skin condition, it's often misunderstood.

In case you're not familiar with it, psoriasis is a condition that causes the body to make new skin cells in days instead of the typical cycle that takes weeks, per the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD). The cells then pile up on the surface of the skin and can create thick, scaly patches.

To people who aren't familiar with the skin condition, psoriasis can look alarming — and plenty worry about "catching" it. But psoriasis isn't contagious, and there are other factors about this skin condition that many people don't understand. Here's a breakdown.

No. 1: There are different types of psoriasis

There are actually six different types of psoriasis, according to the Mayo Clinic. Those include:

- **Plaque psoriasis.** This form of psoriasis impacts up to 90% of people with the skin condition, according to the AAD. Plaque psoriasis causes the skin to form dry, itchy, raised patches, called plaques that are covered with scales. These plaques usually appear on the elbows, knees, lower back and scalp.
- **Nail psoriasis.** Nail psoriasis affects the fingernails and toenails, leading to symptoms like pitting, abnormal nail growth, discoloration and even nail crumbling.
- **Guttate psoriasis.** Guttate psoriasis usually impacts young adults and children. It's typically triggered by a bacterial infection like strep throat and causes symptoms that include small, drop-shaped, scaling spots on the abdomen, arms or legs.
- **Inverse psoriasis.** This type of psoriasis usually shows up in the skin folds of the groin, butt and breasts. It leads to patches of inflamed skin that get worse with friction and sweating.
- **Pustular psoriasis.** This is a rare type of psoriasis that causes pus-filled blisters that can occur in widespread patches or small areas of the palms or soles.
- **Erythrodermic psoriasis.** This is the least common type of psoriasis. It can cover the entire body with a peeling rash that can itch or burn.

No. 2: Psoriasis is not contagious

While some people may worry about "catching" psoriasis, it's not contagious. "Psoriasis can make people who do not have the condition uneasy, as they think it can pass onto them through contact," dermatologist Dr. Ife J. Rodney, founding director of Eternal Dermatology Aesthetics, tells Yahoo Life. "However, psoriasis is an autoimmune condition." With psoriasis, the body's immune system overreacts and attacks skin cells, causing red, scaly, sometimes silvery rashes to appear, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) explains.

"It's simply genetic and no external factors cause psoriasis," Rodney says. "In other words, you cannot catch or pass the condition."

No. 3: Psoriasis is different from eczema

Eczema is a group of conditions that causes inflamed, irritated and often itchy skin, according to the AAD. Eczema is usually the term used for atopic dermatitis, which causes rashes, extremely dry skin and skin that's easily irritated. It can also lead to permanently thickened patches of your skin that develop a leathery texture, the AAD says.

"Both conditions have some overlap, but they have different triggers, symptoms, appearance and causes," Rodney says. "Eczema has several triggers and can present as dry, red, itchy skin. It may also be localized to one place if you've come into contact with an irritant — think: poison ivy, jewelry or harsh soaps."

Eczema can also cause "mild but constant, chronic itching," notes Rodney. Psoriasis, though, "builds up to large, red patches with silver scales that can cover large parts of the joints," Rodney says. "Psoriasis can be painful and even bleed when scratched."

No. 4: Psoriasis has a distinct look

Psoriasis can cause a rash-like appearance, but the patches in particular have a unique look. "Psoriasis tends to have a more salmon pink color to purple color depending on skin type, with thick, silver, fish-like scales and is found on the elbows, knees, belly button and buttocks classically," Dr. Cindy Wassef, assistant professor at the Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, tells Yahoo Life.

Psoriasis is also usually "well-demarcated," Dr. Jessica Kaffenberger, a dermatologist who specializes in psoriasis at The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center, tells Yahoo Life. Meaning, it has set boundaries around the edges. Eczema, on the other hand, tends to have less defined borders around the rash.

No. 5: Patches form by inflammation

With plaque psoriasis — which, again, most people with psoriasis have — the plaques are formed by "skin inflammation and a build-up of scale," New York-based dermatologist **Dr. Gary Goldenberg**, founder of Goldenberg Dermatology, tells Yahoo Life.

Normally, "skin has a life cycle as it matures from the bottom to the skin surface," explains Wassef. "In people with psoriasis, the cells in our skin go through the life cycle process too quickly and do not have a chance to form properly. This leads to the distinctive appearance of psoriasis."

There is help, though. "Fortunately, we now have therapies that block many of these inflammatory molecules," Kaffenberger says.

No. 6: There is no cure for psoriasis

"You can't get rid of psoriasis as there is no cure," Rodney says. "But there are treatment options that can keep flare-ups at a minimum, which we call remission."

Treatments work to stop skin cells from growing so quickly and to remove scales, according to the Mayo Clinic. "Mild psoriasis can be managed with creams and ointments that contain steroids, vitamin D and other compounds," Wassef says. "For people with more advanced psoriasis, injectable medications that decrease the inflammation in the skin are great treatment options."

Combining treatments with a healthy diet, lifestyle and skincare routines can also help, Rodney says.