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What To Know About Nipple Eczema

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It's practically a given that random parts of your body are going to itch somewhere, at some point. But when your nipples start itching, it's understandable to have questions.

If you have a random nipple itch, you can just chalk it up to one of those things. It could just be chafing from a sports bra, an irritating new soap, or even part of PMS. But if you find that this is a regular thing you're dealing with (and you're not pregnant or breastfeeding), it could be a sign of an underlying health condition like nipple eczema, aka nipple dermatitis or breast eczema.

Okay, but what is nipple eczema and how can you know if that's what's behind your urge to give your chest a good scratch? Dermatologists break it down.

EXPERTS IN THIS ARTICLE

Cindy Wassef, MD, board-certified dermatologist and assistant professor at the Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School

Gary Goldenberg, MD, board-certified dermatologist practicing in New York City

Ife J. Rodney, MD, FAAD, board-certified dermatologist and dermapathologist, founding director of Eternal Dermatology in Maryland.

What is nipple eczema?

Atopic dermatitis is the most common form of eczema, a condition that causes an itchy rash to form on your skin, according to the American Academy of Dermatology. Unfortunately, you can also develop eczema on your nipples—and your areola, the circle of skin that surrounds your nipples.

“Nipple dermatitis refers to inflammation or irritation of the skin on and around the nipples,” says board-certified dermatologist Ife J. Rodney, MD, founding director of Eternal Dermatology Aesthetics.

Symptoms of nipple eczema

There are a few signs you might be dealing with nipple eczema vs. your run-of-the-mill itch. A big one is consistency—meaning you're itchy and sensitive for more than a day. Nipple eczema can flare up for a few weeks to years, go away, and then come back, says Gary Goldenberg, MD, a board-certified dermatologist practicing in New York City.

Dr. Rodney says symptoms of the condition can include:

- Redness
- Itching
- A burning sensation
- Pain
- Discharge
- Cracking of the skin

“The symptoms can range from mild to severe,” Dr. Rodney says.

It's sometimes difficult to distinguish eczema from psoriasis. However, Cindy Wassef, MD, an assistant professor at the Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, previously told Well+Good that a psoriasis rash is often salmon pink, dark purple, or gray shade, depending on a person's skin tone, and typically has a silvery scale. “Eczema is more of light pink to brown color, with a fine white scale,” she says.

Know that these nipple eczema symptoms can also look similar to Paget's disease of the nipple, a rare form of breast cancer. According to the UK's National Health Service, if the nipple looks normal and is not red or scaly, it's probably not Paget's. The best way to know for sure is to have it seen by a health care provider.

What triggers breast eczema?

There are a few potential reasons why you might be dealing with nipple eczema, says Dr. Wassef. Having a personal history of eczema can raise your risk of developing the condition on your nipples, as well as being allergic to fabric that touches your nipples, she says. Even friction from your bra or shirts can be one of the common nipple eczema causes, Dr. Wassef says.

Other culprits to have on your radar, per Dr. Rodney, include your laundry detergent, soap, or body lotion—you can have allergies to all of these, which can prompt a nipple eczema flare.

Nipple eczema treatments

When your breasts are itching and burning, one singular thought can take over your brain: How can I get rid of eczema on my nipples? Fortunately, there are a few options for nipple eczema treatment, including simple nipple eczema home remedies and things your doctor can prescribe.

“At-home treatments for nipple dermatitis involve simple at-home techniques to improve the symptoms,” Dr. Rodney says. Here's what she recommends:

- Keep your nipple area clean and dry
- Wear breathable fabrics like cotton

- Avoid irritants
- Use hypoallergenic soaps and lotions

Apply over-the-counter hydrocortisone cream on your nipples to reduce inflammation and itching

“Barrier creams like Vaseline can help minimize the effects of rubbing,” Dr. Wassef says. Nipple balms can also do the trick. Also, this is tough, but Dr. Rodney says that it’s “crucial” to avoid scratching—this can make things worse.

If you’ve tried all of these options and you’re still struggling, it’s time to see a dermatologist. “Your doctor may offer you prescription-strength steroid cream to help with the itching and irritation,” Dr. Wassef says. If your doctor suspects that your eczema flares are due to an allergy, they may do patch testing as well, Dr. Rodney says.

Can nipple eczema go away on its own?

There is some good news here: “It may go away on its own or with moisturizer,” Dr. Wassef says. (Phew.) Dr. Rodney points out that if you remove the underlying cause—like an irritating detergent—from the equation, and take proper self-care measures like keeping the area moisturized, the problem can resolve on its own. “However, if the condition persists or worsens, medical intervention is necessary to identify and address the root cause,” she says.

How to prevent nipple eczema from coming back

There are a few things you can do to lower the risk that your nipple eczema will return. “It’s important to moisturize the area, usually with a petrolatum-based product,” Dr. Goldenberg says. (Petroleum jelly, like Vaseline, is derived from petrolatum.) He also recommends switching to looser clothes, including your bra. “Changing ill-fitting clothing to those that fit better is important,” he says.

You’ll also want to figure out what your triggers are and try to avoid them in the future, Dr. Rodney says. (Look at your soap, laundry detergent, and lotion first.)

If you happen to develop nipple eczema and it’s not getting better, talk to your doctor. There’s no need to struggle through it alone.