

VULVAR LICHEN PLANUS

What is it?

Lichen planus is an inflammatory skin disease that most commonly causes an itchy rash of small purplish bumps, often on the arms, legs, back or inside the mouth. It can also affect the genital area, including the vagina. In some cases, the nails and the scalp are also involved. It is possible to have the disease in one area without ever having a problem elsewhere. Most patients with vulvar lichen planus have involvement in the mouth but often on other skin surfaces as well.

What causes lichen planus?

The cause of lichen planus is unknown. We know that it is NOT caused by infection, hormonal changes or ageing, and is not because of anything that you did or didn't do. It results from inflammation in the skin. There may be a problem with our immune system, the system that protects a person from infection. In lichen planus the system is overactive and makes proteins that cause inflammation in the skin or on the genital area. This is referred to as an autoimmune reaction. Occasionally medicines (like hydrochlorothiazide) can start this reaction. Why the lesions develop in some places and not others is not known.

Lichen planus is NOT contagious and cannot be passed to a sexual partner.

What are the symptoms and what do I see?

If only the skin is affected, the rash is usually on the inside of the wrist, the forearms and the ankles. The spots are a purple color and you may see some fine white streaks on the top of the spots. A similar white, lacy streaking may be seen inside the mouth, but there may not be any symptoms. There may be sore, red, ulcerated areas around the gum margins, tongue and inside of cheeks.

What about vulvar lichen planus?

- Soreness, burning and rawness are very common symptoms. If the outer layers of the skin break down (erosions), these areas appear moist and red.
- There may be a white lacy pattern on the vulva. This pattern can also be seen around the edges of the erosions
- The vulva may appear pale white or pink/red. Scarring with loss of the inner lips (labia minora) can be seen. The clitoris may be buried under scar tissue.
- If the vagina is involved, intercourse can be painful.
- Erosions can occur inside the vagina in a patchy or generalized pattern. Some women have a sticky, yellow or yellow-green discharge, which can be bloodstained, especially after intercourse. If the two surfaces of the vagina heal together, the vaginal opening can become narrowed. This is

one reason why intercourse can be painful. Sometimes it is difficult for a doctor to perform an internal examination.

- On rare occasions, the skin may have thickened areas. These may have a warty appearance.

How is lichen planus diagnosed?

Doctors familiar with the condition may diagnose it by looking at the skin and seeing the characteristic appearance. The diagnosis is usually confirmed by taking a small piece of skin to be looked at under a microscope. This is called a biopsy. This is a simple procedure that can be done in the doctor's office after numbing with a local anesthetic.

How is lichen planus treated?

There is no absolute cure for lichen planus. However, in some cases, lichen planus seems to come and go of its own accord and it is possible that it will disappear completely. All irritating products must be stopped. Avoid using soap or perfumed products in the area. If the disease is mild, it can be treated with creams and ointments. Generally, strong topical steroid ointments are used safely in this condition.

Erosive disease can be more difficult to control but most respond to strong topical steroid ointments. Cortisone given orally or as an injection can be helpful. Medication to suppress the immune reaction may be needed. Other less common drugs may be needed. There are many treatments used to treat lichen planus. Treatment needs to be selected to fit your problem. Different people respond to different things. The medications will control but often will not cure the lichen planus. Treatment is a long process and close follow up with you and your care-giver is important. For scarring and narrowing of the vagina and/or the entranceway, dilators are advised. Only rarely is surgery needed.

What should I watch for?

As lichen planus is a chronic inflammatory skin condition, there is a very small risk of developing local types of skin cancer in the area. The risk is about 2%. Any new raised or non-healing areas in your genital area should be reported to your healthcare provider. It is important that your lichen planus is treated and you are followed by your healthcare provider.

Internet sites see:

www.dermnetnz.org/scaly/lichen-planus.html

www.dermlectures.com/LecturesQuicktime.cfm?lectureID=89 - 38k