

What to do if you are concerned you have a skin infestation.

What are the aims of this leaflet?

This leaflet has been written to help you understand more about what happens when you are concerned there is an infestation of your skin, but nothing has been found to prove that infestation so far., It covers what might be contributing to your symptoms, and what can be done to help you manage them.

How do I make sure that my health care professional is checking for an infestation.

Your doctor or nurse will look for an infestation of your skin by examining your skin pretty much all over. The HCP may look with a dermatoscope (magnifying instrument) or may examine samples which you bring with you. Sometimes, your HCP may take a scraping of your skin. Sometimes, HCPs may not be able to find proof of an infestation in the skin and may talk to you about the plans to keep looking, but also consider treatments which help with your symptoms (itch, cuts, sensations of movements in the skin, erosions of the skin and ulceration).

What are concerns about infestation?

You have been given this leaflet as you have expressed considerable concern that your skin or other parts of your body are infested with a mite, organism or other material. You may have already seen other HCPs who have not been able to prove the presence of a skin infestation. This situation can be frustrating. However, it is important to remember that your sometimes it takes time to sort problems like this out and your HCP will offer treatments which will help with symptoms whilst trying to keep looking for a cause of the problem.

What causes concerns about infestation?

It can be difficult to quickly find proof of an infestation in the skin. Your HCP will continue to look for the cause of the problem. Sometimes there are medical conditions which contribute to this problem including internal disorders such as coeliac and thyroid disease, recreational drug use, and other reasons. Regardless of the cause, these symptoms can cause significant psychological distress and have a negative impact on many aspects of life. This in turn can lead to poor sleep, anxiety, low self-esteem or feeling low, which can make any physical symptoms feel worse.

Am I going to infect other people?

Some people who are affected are worried that other members of their family, friends or even pets might be affected because of them. It is important that you inform your healthcare team about any such concerns so that professional help can be offered before trying to address this yourself.

What are the symptoms which many people describe?

People with this condition commonly describe itching, crawling, moving or biting skin sensations. This may be just on the scalp or may be somewhere else on the body. Some people also report seeing black specks, particles, fibres, worms or small insects coming from their skin that others may be unable to see. Some people say that they come from the nose, around the eyes, or from the gut.

What are the skin changes seen in concerns about infestation? Visible skin changes may or may not be present in this condition. Common changes seen include redness, scrapes or scratches, open wounds, increased or decreased areas of skin colour, scarring, and sometimes an eczema-like rash. These changes are often triggered or worsened by scratching, picking at the skin, applying chemicals or heat to treat the perceived infestation area. We recognise that it may be very difficult, but advise that you resist using such methods, since this typically leads to worsening of the symptoms.

How am I going to be investigated?

Your HCP will examine your skin and may look at parts of your skin with a dermatoscope (magnifying instrument). If you have material you have found on your skin or in your home/work environment, your HCP will look at that too. HCPs may also take scrapings of your skin or may organise for blood tests. In some people, despite a thorough assessment and lots of tests, no cause is found. While this may feel very frustrating, healthcare professionals understand the physical sensations of crawling and biting that you feel are very real, not imagined, and are still treatable.

Understanding the link between mind and skin

We know that problems affecting the skin have an impact on mental health and mood. It is also clear that conditions affecting the mind can significantly worsen skin conditions or even cause them in some cases. There is increasing evidence that multiple systems in the body interact with and influence each other to cause illness, including the skin, gut, nervous, hormone and immune systems. It may seem strange if your healthcare team offers you treatment to help improve your psychological wellbeing when you are primarily concerned about your skin, however this is a recommended treatment approach that has been shown to be highly effective.

How can concerns about infestation be treated?

If your HCP is able to find evidence of a specific infestation, they will proceed to treat it accordingly. When they are unable to find an infestation, it is difficult to justify the use of treatments specifically for a particular mite, parasite or material. Such treatments may have side-effects. Your HCP will continue to keep an open mind on what may be causing your symptoms and will re-examine you and review any further specimens you may bring to clinic.

Sometimes people with concerns about infestation where no identified cause has been found will be offered medications to treat the symptoms, and sometimes this may include treatments which work on the nerves in the skin and on itch itself. These medications may seem scary as they can be used in other medical conditions, but when they are used for the skin, they are used in very low doses, much lower doses and are usually very safe. Research shows that neuroleptics can help with the itching / biting / moving sensations in the skin (or elsewhere in the body). Having started such medication, people usually report a reduction in their symptoms, and an improvement in their mood and quality of life. At the same time, your HCP will usually treat the skin with creams which contain anti-itch or anti-microbial agents.

It is important to treat every aspect of the problem in people with concerns about infestation. Treatment is therefore offered to help with any feelings of stress, anxiety or depression. You may also be offered an appointment to see a

psychologist. There may even be a mental health care professional in the dermatology clinic. Living with skin disease is often associated with a lot of stress, and increasingly dermatology units have access to mental health care professionals to try to address this. They will be able to listen to your concerns and take a full history of the impact these feelings are having on you. If needed, they will offer you evidence-based talking therapy to help reduce the distress related to your condition.

What is the usual outcome?

Often treatment may take some time to completely eradicate the problem. You will probably be seeing the dermatology multidisciplinary team for a number of months or longer. So it may be important to speak to your HCP about what is happening to you, and to make sure that they understand how frustrating this problem can be. In most instances, this problem is successfully treatable.