

Gynaecology

Lichen Sclerosus

What is lichen sclerosus?

- Lichen sclerosus is a common painful inflammatory skin condition that in women typically affects the vulva and anus. It does not extend into the vagina.
- It is not an infectious condition.
- Lichen sclerosis is not sexually transmitted.
- There is no cure for lichen sclerosus but symptoms can be relieved with correct diagnosis and treatment.
- There may be long periods of remission between flare ups of the condition and very rarely soreness persists.

What are the symptoms of lichen sclerosus?

- chronic itching and soreness of the vulval area
- splitting of the vulval skin causing stinging and pain
- inflammation and sometimes swelling
- skin becomes fragile, pale and white in appearance and there is increased susceptibility to infection and thrush
- shrinking (atrophy) of the vulval area
- loss of vulval features (labia)
- pain and difficulties with sexual intercourse
- fusion of the labia and clitoral hood



Patient Information

Not all women get all of the symptoms; some women may only experience pain for example, or have no symptoms at all.

There is a small risk, estimated at between 3-5%, of cancer of the vulva in adult women with lichen sclerosus.

Who can get lichen sclerosus?

Women who get lichen sclerosus are commonly middle aged, post menopausal women, although the disease can affect women of any age, including young girls. In addition there are known cases of boys and men diagnosed with lichen sclerosus of the penis.

What are the causes of lichen sclerosus?

The cause of lichen sclerosus is not known, although it is generally thought that lichen sclerosus is not caused by a virus, bacteria or fungus.

It is possible that it is an auto-immune illness in which the body's immune system attacks a part of the body causing inflammation and damage to the affected part of the body. This has not been proved, although about 1 in 4 people with lichen sclerosus have another auto immune condition such as thyroid problems or pernicious anaemia.

Triggers of lichen sclerosus are not known but could include trauma and hormonal influences.

How can lichen sclerosus be diagnosed and treated?

Diagnosis can be a long process. Referral to a specialist is usually necessary.

Often experienced specialists can say by examination that this is what they think the condition is, but to get an accurate diagnosis a vulval biopsy may be necessary.

The specialist may well start you on a course of steroid ointments with instructions on how and when to apply. This should reduce the inflammation. You may then be reviewed in the clinic again in 3-4 months to see if this course of treatment has worked. This treatment is safe, can often control the symptoms very well, and can help women go back to a normal life.

Patient Information

A vulval biopsy is generally only taken if there is an area of concern or the ointments you were given have had little benefit to your symptoms.

There is no permanent cure for lichen sclerosus, but treatment with a topical steroid ointment usually controls the symptoms and prevents the condition from getting worse.

What can I do to help this condition?

Lichen sclerosus is generally made worse by excessive heat and moisture, therefore where possible it is always better to:

- Wear cotton underwear (avoid girdles if possible)
- Wear loose fitting trousers
- Avoid perfumed soaps
- Dry the vulva carefully following a bath or shower

Many women feel frightened when they are first told that they have lichen sclerosus, and worry that it may develop into cancer. You may find the treatments and appointments embarrassing and frightening, and you may feel tense, tearful or withdrawn. If we can help in any way please ask us and we will do all we can to help you feel more comfortable.

If you need to discuss this condition further please do not hesitate to phone **Sister Lynn Connor (Clinical Specialist Nurse) on 024 7696 7222.**

If there is no answer, please leave a short message and your telephone number on the answering machine and Lynn will return your call as soon as she is available.

National sources of further information:

National Lichen Sclerosus Support Group: Tel. 0776 594 7599

www.lichensclerosus.org

Patient Information

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format please contact Lynn Connor on 024 7696 7222 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

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