

Gynaecology

Vulval lichen planus

This leaflet contains information for patients with lichen planus of the vulval area.

What is lichen planus?

Lichen planus is a condition that mainly affects the skin, causing an itchy rash. It can affect the mouth, genitals, hair, nails and rarely other body parts.

- Lichen planus affects around 1-2% of the population
- Lichen planus is a recurrent rash due to inflammation
- The rash is itchy and non-infectious

Lichen planus can affect many areas of the body, such as the arms, legs, back, scalp and nails. It can also affect the lining (mucous membrane) of the mouth. Other affected areas in women include the vulva and the vaginal introitus (entrance).

What are the symptoms of vulval lichen planus?

- Chronic itching and soreness of the vulval area.
- Skin becomes more fragile than normal. You may experience splitting of the vulval area, causing stinging and pain.
- Inflammation and sometimes swelling.
- Susceptibility to infection.
- The vulva may become distorted, causing a change in shape/size.



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- The vagina may become narrowed.
- You may experience pain and difficulties with sexual intercourse.
- Pain and difficulty with passing urine.

You may not experience all these symptoms. Some women may only experience itching or have no symptoms at all.

Lichen planus can carry a very small risk of developing local types of skin cancer. The risk is about 1 in 50.

Who can get lichen planus?

Lichen planus of the skin can affect both men and women. But oral lichen planus is more common among females.

In around 1 in 2 cases of lichen planus, the mouth is affected.

The condition is more common in adults over 40 years of age.

Lichen planus is not infectious, does not usually run in families, and cannot be passed on to others.

What are the causes of lichen planus?

The cause of lichen planus is unknown. But it's thought the causes of the condition may be related to:

- The immune system (the body's natural defence against infection). For example, thyroid problems.
- A reaction to certain types of medication, such as antimalarial tablets

How can lichen planus be diagnosed and treated?

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

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 needed.

The specialist may start you on a course of steroid ointments/cream. They will give you instructions on how and when to apply it. This should reduce inflammation and itching.

You may then be reviewed in the clinic again in three to four months to see if the treatment has worked.

This treatment is safe, can often control the symptoms very well, and can help you go back to a normal life.

There is no permanent cure for lichen planus. So treatments aim to ease the symptoms. Mild cases of lichen planus will not need treatment.

Different mouthwashes are also available to help with oral symptoms.

What can I do to help this condition?

- Avoid washing with soaps/bubble bath
- Do not let affected areas of skin come into contact with shampoo (wash hair over basin)
- Use a moisturiser on the area
- Wear cotton underwear
- Wear stockings instead of tights
- Wear loose-fitting clothes (try to avoid trousers/jeans)
- Use the prescribed cream/ointment on the affected area as instructed

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Many women feel frightened when told they have lichen planus. They worry it may develop into cancer. You may find the treatments and appointments embarrassing and frightening. 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.

More information

If you need to discuss this condition further, please contact 024 7696 7222.

If there is no answer, please leave a short message and your telephone number on the answering machine. Your call will be returned as soon as possible.

National sources of further information:

www.uklp.org.uk

UK Lichen Planus

c/o 14 Newbury Avenue

Calne

Wiltshire SN11 9UN

Telephone: 0751 443 2552

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