

Patient Information Leaflet: Lichen Planus

What is Lichen Planus?

Lichen planus is an inflammatory condition that can affect the skin, mucous membranes (mouth, genitals), hair, and nails. It is characterised by flat, purple, itchy bumps or lesions. Lichen planus is considered an autoimmune condition, where the immune system mistakenly attacks healthy cells, leading to inflammation and irritation.

Causes:

The exact cause of lichen planus is not fully understood. However, several factors may contribute to its development:

- **Autoimmune Response:** The immune system may react against the body's own cells.
- **Genetic Factors:** Family history might play a role in susceptibility.
- **Triggers:** Various factors may trigger or worsen symptoms, including stress, certain medications (like non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs and some heart medications), hepatitis C virus infection, allergic reactions, and exposure to certain chemicals.

Symptoms:

Symptoms of lichen planus can vary depending on the area affected but may include:

- **Skin:** Flat-topped, purple, itchy lesions that may occur anywhere on the body, commonly on the wrists, ankles, lower legs and lower back.
- **Mouth:** White, lacy patches or painful sores (oral lichen planus) that may cause burning sensations and difficulty eating or speaking.
- **Nails:** Thinning, ridging, or splitting of the nails.
- **Scalp:** Hair loss (lichen planopilaris), often characterised by severe itch, which can lead to permanent balding in some cases.

Diagnosis:

Lichen planus is typically diagnosed by a dermatologist through:

- **Physical Examination:** A visual examination of the skin and lesions.
- **Medical History:** Discussing symptoms, duration, and any potential triggers.
- **Biopsy:** In some cases, a small sample of the tissue may be taken for laboratory analysis to confirm the diagnosis and rule out other conditions.

Management and Treatment Options:

While there is no cure for lichen planus, several treatment options can help manage symptoms and reduce inflammation:

1. **Topical Corticosteroids:**
 - These anti-inflammatory creams or ointments are often the first line of treatment to reduce itching and inflammation.
2. **Oral Corticosteroids:**
 - For more severe cases or widespread lesions, short courses of oral corticosteroids may be prescribed to quickly relieve symptoms.
3. **Immunosuppressants:**
 - Medications such as azathioprine or methotrexate may be used in chronic or severe cases to suppress the immune response.



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4. Retinoids:

- Topical or oral retinoids (vitamin A derivatives) may improve skin lesions and are sometimes used in treatment.

5. Phototherapy:

- Certain types of light therapy can help reduce inflammation and improve skin condition.

6. Antihistamines:

- Over-the-counter antihistamines can help alleviate itching and discomfort.

Self-Care and Lifestyle Tips:

- **Skin Care:** Use gentle, fragrance-free skin products to avoid further irritation.
- **Moisturising:** Keep the affected areas moisturised to help with dryness and itching.
- **Avoid Triggers:** Identify and avoid known triggers such as stress, certain medications, or allergens.
- **Oral Hygiene:** If you have oral lichen planus, maintain good oral hygiene and consult your dentist for advice on managing symptoms.

When to Seek Medical Advice:

- If you notice new lesions or if existing lesions become painful or change in appearance.
- If you have difficulty eating, swallowing, or speaking due to oral lesions.
- If you experience significant side effects from medications or have concerns about your treatment plan.

Conclusion: Lichen planus can be a challenging condition, but with proper management and treatment, many individuals find relief from symptoms and improve their quality of life. If you have lichen planus or suspect you might have it, working closely with your dermatologist is essential to develop an effective treatment plan tailored to your needs.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding lichen planus or its management, please consult your healthcare provider or dermatologist for further guidance.

