

Experts in Skin & Hair

Oral Treatments for Itch and Pain

Are there any tablets available over the counter that might help?

Oral anti-histamines like Cetirizine and Loratadine are available over the counter and can be trialed for itch. They are normally recommended as a once daily treatment but can be used 3-4 times daily. When higher doses are used, they can cause some drowsiness, so they should be increased gradually.

What other tablet options are there?

Beyond over the counter anti-histamines, there are a number of other options that include prescription anti-histamines, anti-inflammatory antibiotics, oral steroids, anti-depressants and anti-epilepsy medications, that are all used for effect on itch and pain pathways.

Fexofenadine is sometimes preferred if higher doses are needed, as it is less likely to cause day-time drowsiness. Sedating anti-histamines like hydroxyzine may be prescribed for night-time use.

Sometimes tetracycline antibiotics are used as they can have a skin calming effect. It may take at least six weeks to see if they are going to help and they often require a double dose.

Occasionally a trial of oral steroids is recommended but their side effects limit long term use.

How is Amitriptyline used and what are the main side effects?

Amitriptyline is a tricyclic anti-depressant. It is recommended to start at low dose (10mg), taking half an hour before bed and gradually titrate up the dose. The main side effects are dry mouth and drowsiness. It is difficult to predict what dose you will be able to tolerate. Normally you will be asked to start with one 10mg tablet and if it causes too many side effects this can be halved. If you tolerate it well, you can increase in 10mg intervals. The aim is to get as high as tolerated for maximum effect, but it can be beneficial even at lower doses. One of the major benefits of Amitriptyline is that they do have a sedative effect and positive impact on mood that can be contributing to itch and scratching.

How is Gabapentin and Pregabalin used and what are the side effects?

Gabapentin is a drug used in epilepsy but alters the nerve pathways and is used for pain and itch. The dose can be rapidly titrated. It is recommended to start with one 300mg* tablet at night-time. The following day or day after, this can be increased to twice daily dosing and the day after you can increase up to three times daily. You will be asked to continue on the three times dosing until clinical review. Gabapentin sometimes can alter your appetite, cause constipation or diarrhoea, wind, nausea, dry mouth and occasional drowsiness. Most side effects settle with time.

*A lower dose may be used in elderly patients or patients with pre-existing kidney impairment.

Pregabalin is usually started at a dose between 25-75mg twice daily and this dose can also be increased after 7 days. Side effects are similar to Gabapentin.

