



What is lichen sclerosis?

Lichen sclerosis is a chronic inflammatory skin condition which can affect any part of the skin, but in females it most often affects the vulval skin and the skin around the anus. It can start in childhood or adulthood and affect girls or women of any age.

What causes lichen sclerosis?

The cause of lichen sclerosis is not fully understood. It is felt to be a type of autoimmune condition in which the person's immune system reacts against itself in some way. Sometimes it is associated with other diseases in which the body's immune system attacks normal tissues such as the thyroid gland (causing an over- or underactive thyroid gland) or the insulin-producing cells in the pancreas (causing diabetes).

Lichen sclerosis is not due to an infection - the disease is not contagious, so sexual partners cannot pick it up.

What are the symptoms of lichen sclerosis?

Many patients have none, but the most common symptom of lichen sclerosis is itching. As a rule the patches on the general skin surface seldom itch much, but those in the genital area do, and can also be sore if the skin breaks down or cracks. In the genital area, the scar-like process can tighten the skin, and this can interfere with passing urine and with sexual intercourse. Tightening of the skin around the anus can lead to problems with constipation. The skin has a white shiny appearance which can sometimes become raised and thickened.

How will lichen sclerosis be diagnosed?

The diagnosis of lichen sclerosis can usually be made from the typical appearance of the condition. Sometimes a small skin sample may be taken and checked under the microscope to confirm the diagnosis, especially if there is an open sore or a thickened area of skin. This is known as a skin biopsy and requires a local anaesthetic injection and possibly stitches to close the wound, leading to a small scar.

How can lichen sclerosis be treated?

A variety of treatments are available for lichen sclerosis:

- strong steroid ointments are used to stop the inflammation and also soften the affected skin. Please do not worry about the warning inside the pack, where it might say not to use these ointments on genital skin - your doctor will advise you how and when to apply the steroid ointments safely
- moisturisers help to soften and protect the skin
- the fragile skin of lichen sclerosis may be more susceptible than normal skin to infection with Candida yeasts (thrush) or bacteria, and may split or even bleed. Your doctor will treat these problems if they arise
- rarely, a small operation may be needed to divide adhesions if the skin sticks together

- treatment is for life, and it is very important to have regular follow up arrangements and check-ups every six months, to monitor the skin and ensure any pre-cancerous changes are detected early.

Self-care (what can I do?)

- Avoid washing with soap and instead use an emollient soap substitute/ cream.
- Carefully dry yourself after passing urine to reduce the contact of urine with your skin.
- Using a moisturiser or yellow soft paraffin as a barrier cream can protect your skin from exposure to urine.
- If sexual intercourse is painful because of tightening at the entrance to the vagina, the use of lubricants and, on occasions, vaginal dilators, will help. Your doctor will advise on this if necessary.
- Keep an eye on your skin. Cancer of the vulva may be a little more likely to occur in lichen sclerosis that has been present for many years, than in normal skin. Lifelong regular self-examination is very important for all females who have or have had genital lichen sclerosis. If any skin change develops which does not respond to steroid creams, in particular any skin thickening, soreness or ulceration lasting more than two weeks, you need to tell your doctor without delay. You may need a biopsy to test for skin cancer.
- If you are a smoker, stop smoking to reduce the risk of cancer.

References

www.lichensclerosus.org

www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/lichen-sclerosus/symptoms-causes/syc-20374448

www.anzvs.org/patient-information/lichen-sclerosus

