

Seborrheic Dermatitis

What is seborrheic dermatitis?

Seborrheic dermatitis is a skin condition that causes flaking of the skin. The flaking most often occurs on the scalp, on the face, and behind the ears. Sometimes thick layers of scales form on the skin. Seborrheic dermatitis is a common cause of dandruff.

Another name for seborrheic dermatitis is seborrhea.

How does it occur?

There is no one specific cause for seborrhea. Sometimes it occurs when the body has hormonal changes, or when a certain type of fungus is on the skin. People who have Parkinson's disease or epilepsy are more likely to have seborrhea. Some people who have seborrhea do not have enough of some types of B vitamins in their diets.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms vary from mild to severe. The usual symptoms are flaking of dry skin from the scalp or a buildup of waxy dead skin behind the ear lobes. Often the skin on the middle of the forehead and on either side of the nose is red. Flaking can also occur in these areas. Flaking or scaly skin may form on the eyelids at the base of the eyelashes and may be difficult to wash away.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will examine you. Lab tests are usually not necessary. In some cases your skin might be tested for fungus, or you might have blood tests.

How is it treated?

The treatment depends on where the seborrhea is and how severe it is.

If the seborrhea is on your scalp only, dandruff shampoo may be all you need. Be sure to follow the directions for use of the shampoo. Leave the shampoo on your hair for the amount of time recommended on the bottle before you rinse it out. Use the shampoo only as often as recommended.

Steroid creams or lotions may be used to treat more severe cases of seborrhea on the scalp, sometimes in addition to dandruff shampoo.

Your health care provider may recommend an antifungal shampoo if other shampoos do not help. Be sure to follow the directions given for its use.

Treating the scalp with shampoo may also help seborrhea on nearby areas of skin such as the forehead and eyebrows. Mild steroid creams can be put on the face to treat redness and flaking.

Sometimes seborrhea causes flaky skin to build up on the eyelids, especially at the base of the eyelashes. It may help to put a mixture of half no-tears shampoo and half water on the eyelids with a cotton swab every day.

How long will the effects last?

Seborrhea is a problem that may last months or years. The goal of treatment is to control the symptoms. It may not be possible to cure the symptoms completely.

How can I prevent seborrhea?

Doctors do not know how to prevent seborrhea. Treatment, however, can usually control the symptoms.

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