

KP / 'STRAWBERRY SKIN' / 'CHICKEN SKIN'

# Keratosis pilaris

## CATEGORY:

## Follicular disorder

### LOOKS LIKE:

Small bumps on the skin that may be red, white, brown, or the same colour as the surrounding skin

### FEELS LIKE:

Rough, bumpy, dry; occasionally itchy

### OUTLOOK:

Harmless; no specific cure but often clears up during adulthood

### LOCATION:

Most common on the outside of the upper arms, and the thighs



## WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE —



Small rough spots of keratosis pilaris on the upper arm



Close-up of keratin spikes that are blocking the hair follicle



KP on the cheeks is often associated with underlying redness



Small, red and sand-coloured spots on the thighs



Keratosis pilaris in a darker skin type



The spots of KP are sometimes conspicuously red

## What is it?

Keratosis pilaris (KP) is a very common, dry skin condition. It is caused by the build-up of keratin (a tough protein found in our hair, skin, and nails) in the hair follicles. It is harmless and is not infectious or contagious (cannot spread between people).

Keratosis pilaris often starts in childhood or adolescence.

The name of the condition comes from 'keratosis', meaning 'scaly skin'; and 'pilaris' which means 'hair'. It is sometimes also called 'strawberry skin' or 'chicken skin'.

# Keratosis pilaris

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## CAUSES —

Keratosis pilaris is caused by a **build-up of keratin** in the hair follicles in some areas of skin. The keratin protein is not shed as easily and instead plugs up the follicles, leading to bumpy, rough skin.

The exact reason why some people get keratosis pilaris is not fully understood. There seems to be a **genetic** link and it can run in families.

You may be more likely to get keratosis pilaris if you have other skin conditions like atopic dermatitis (eczema), or ichthyosis.

## SYMPTOMS —

The typical symptoms of keratosis pilaris are:

- **Dry, rough** skin with small bumps (sometimes described as 'goosebumps')
- The **bumps** may be white, red, brown, or the same colour as the surrounding skin
- Most common on the outside of the upper arms and legs; can occur elsewhere including the face and buttocks.

Sometimes, affected skin can also be **itchy** or have ingrown hairs. Facial redness may also be seen.

Symptoms are often more noticeable during the winter months when skin tends to be more dry.

## COMPLICATIONS —

Complications from keratosis pilaris are uncommon, but can include:

- Impacts on self-confidence
- Irritation and inflammation in or around some of the affected hair follicles
- Longer-lasting dark or pale spots on the skin (post-inflammatory pigmentation).

Skin picking can lead to infection and scarring.

Rarely, scarring with loss of hair (eg, eyebrow hair) can be seen in some subtypes of keratosis pilaris.

## DIAGNOSIS —

Keratosis pilaris is usually diagnosed by a healthcare professional on **visual assessment of your skin**. A hand-held magnifying tool called a **dermatoscope** may be used to get a closer view of the skin and hair follicles.

Other tests, such as a biopsy (removal of a small sample of the skin for analysis in the laboratory), are not usually needed but may be used to rule out other conditions.

## TREATMENT —

General advice if you have keratosis pilaris:

- **Avoid picking or squeezing bumps** — this can lead to inflammation, infection, and scarring
- **Exfoliate** gently eg, with scrub or sponge

- **Moisturise** to reduce dryness — consider trialling a moisturising cream that contains anti-scaling ingredients eg, salicylic acid, urea, lactic acid, or alpha-hydroxy acids (discontinue if irritation occurs).

The following treatment options may also be helpful — discuss with your doctor for more information:

- **Topical retinoids** (Vitamin A-related creams / lotions / gels)
- **Steroid creams / ointments** — for itching
- **Laser/light therapy** — for redness and inflammation
- **Laser hair removal** — may reduce long-term hair growth and improve symptoms.

## OUTCOME —

Keratosis pilaris is a very **common** and generally **harmless** skin condition. Some people consider it a normal variant (type) of skin. It is not infectious or contagious, and is not cancerous.

While there is no specific cure for the condition, the above skincare measures and treatment strategies can be helpful in reducing symptoms.

Keratosis pilaris symptoms often improve in adult life.



<https://dermnetnz.org/topics/keratosis-pilaris>