

Lichen planus

CATEGORY:

Autoimmune / Autoinflammatory

LOOKS LIKE:

Variable eg, shiny purple or red bumps or patches on the skin; white streaks and ulcers in the mouth or on genitals; nail changes; bald spots on the scalp

FEELS LIKE:

Itchy, sore, bumpy, or scaly

OUTLOOK:

Symptoms may come and go, or be long-lasting (chronic)

LOCATION:

Can affect any area on the body: including skin, scalp, nails, mucous membranes (eg, mouth, genitals)



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE —



Lichen planus on the inside of the mouth



Close-up of lichen planus on the wrist



Lichen planus bumps that came up in a scratch mark (Koebner phenomenon)



Lichen planus on the palm



Scarring of the nail plate due to lichen planus



Rings of lichen planus on the eyelid

What is it?

Lichen planus is an inflammatory condition involving the skin, nails, or mucous membranes (eg, mouth and genital areas). It is uncommon and most often affects adults aged 30–60 years. It is not contagious, and there are various treatment options available.

You may be more likely to get lichen planus if you have:

- Family members with the condition
- A viral infection (eg, hepatitis C)
- Skin wounds or infections
- Other illnesses or stress.

Lichen planus

CAUSES —

Lichen planus is thought to be caused by an **autoimmune reaction**, where the body's own immune cells attack proteins in the skin, nails, or mucous membranes.

Sometimes, lichen planus symptoms can also be triggered by certain medications (eg, hydroxychloroquine, beta-blockers, methyl dopa), remedies (eg, gold salts), or allergies (eg, mercury in teeth fillings).

SYMPTOMS —

There are several types of lichen planus and these can look and feel different. Some people have more than one type. Symptoms may include:

- **Skin** — shiny, firm, scaly patches or bumps; usually itchy; often red or purple; may come up where the skin has been scratched or injured
- **Mucous membranes** — white streaks, redness and peeling, bumps, or painful open sores (ulcers) in the mouth or the genital areas (vulva or penis)
- **Nails** — changes in one or more finger/toenails eg, thin, bumpy, slow-growing, scarred, or lost nails
- **Scalp** — small red bumps on the scalp; sometimes leading to permanent bald patches.

There are also other less common types, for example those that cause flat grey-brown marks on the skin; or blistering. Rarely, lichen planus affects the eyelids, ears, throat, bladder, or anus.

COMPLICATIONS —

- Skin infections.
- Sleep difficulty due to itch.
- Trouble eating and drinking due to painful ulcers.
- Pain with sexual activity due to genital symptoms.
- Skin discolouration, thickening, or scarring.
- Patches of permanent hair loss.
- Rarely, longstanding lichen planus can lead to a type of cancer called squamous cell carcinoma (SCC).

DIAGNOSIS —

Diagnosis begins with a **healthcare professional** assessing your skin, nails, and mucous membranes, sometimes with a handheld magnifying tool (dermatoscope).

Often a **biopsy** (a sample of the affected area) is recommended to rule out other conditions. Sometimes blood tests (eg, to check for hepatitis) or allergy tests are done.

TREATMENT AND PREVENTION —

General advice for skin and mouth care:

- Use moisturisers and soap substitutes to **prevent skin dryness**
- Regularly brush and floss teeth.

Managing any itch or pain is a priority. Depending on symptoms, strategies may include:

- **Mouthwashes or oral ointments** to reduce pain from mouth ulcers
- Sedating **antihistamines** to help night-time itch
- **Steroid** ointments/creams, tape, tablets, or injections to reduce inflammation
- Other medications to calm down the immune system (**immunosuppressants**).

In some cases, treatment might also involve:

- Vitamin A products (retinoids)
- Ultraviolet light therapy
- Antibiotics for infection.

OUTCOME —

Lichen planus of the skin often settles within a couple of years, or gradually after any triggering medication is stopped. Lichen planus of the scalp, nails, and mucous membranes may last longer.

Some people have periods where symptoms settle (remission), or recur and flare-up (relapse).

A variety of treatment options are available to help manage symptoms.



<https://dermnetnz.org/topics/lichen-planus>