

# Lichen sclerosus

CATEGORY:

## Autoimmune / Autoinflammatory

LOOKS LIKE:

White, shiny, wrinkled patches of skin

FEELS LIKE:

Thinned or thickened; can be intensely itchy and painful

OUTLOOK:

Long-term disease that can be managed with treatment; can lead to permanent scarring if untreated

LOCATION:

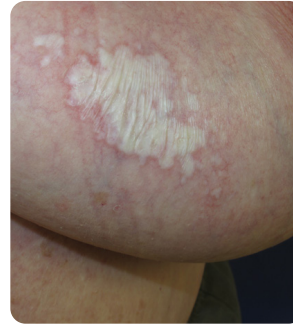
Most commonly affects skin around the genitals and anus



## WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE —



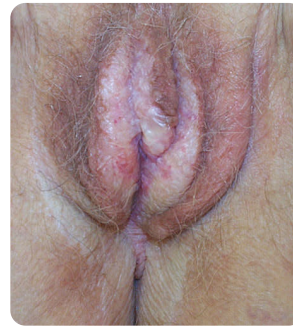
White, wrinkly areas of lichen sclerosus on the trunk



White, wrinkly areas on the breast — a common site for lichen sclerosus



White, scar-like (sclerotic) skin on the outer fold of the vulva (labia majora)



White sclerotic areas on the inner fold of the vulva (labia minora) and skin around the anus



The wrinkled white appearances of lichen sclerosus under the breast



Loss of normal skin colour from vulval lichen sclerosus

## What is it?

Lichen sclerosus is an uncommon, long-term (chronic) skin condition that causes white patches of skin which can be itchy and painful. It typically affects the genital area.

Anyone can get lichen sclerosus, but it largely affects post-menopausal women. Women are 10 times more likely to develop it than men.

Lichen sclerosus does not spread between people (ie, it is **non-contagious**) and is not cancerous.

# Lichen sclerosis

## CAUSES —

The exact cause of lichen sclerosis is unknown. Several factors are thought to contribute, including:

- **An overactive immune system** — it may be a type of autoimmune disease (the body's own immune cells attacking itself)
- **Hormones** — in women, it is more common after menopause
- **Genetics** — might run in families
- **Skin irritation or injury** eg, piercings, urinary incontinence.

## SYMPTOMS —

Lichen sclerosis looks like **white wrinkled patches of skin** that can appear thinned or thickened. It is often itchy and painful.

Lichen sclerosis mostly occurs on the **external genitals**, though it can appear on any skin surface. It is rare for it to occur elsewhere on the body without the genitals also being involved.

In women, it typically affects the skin around (not inside) the **vagina** and **anus**.

Symptoms can include:

- **Itch** — can be intense and disrupt sleep
- **Pain** — burning, stinging, or dull discomfort; especially during urination or sexual activity
- Bruises, blisters, cracks (fissures), or sores (ulcers) coming up easily in affected area/s
- Constipation and pain/bleeding with bowel motions.

## COMPLICATIONS —

- **Infections** — eg, fungal or bacterial infections can develop in irritated, cracked skin due to lichen sclerosis.
- **Permanent scarring** — particularly if untreated; in genital areas, can further interfere with urination and sexual activity.
- **Squamous cell carcinoma (SCC)** — a type of skin cancer; although lichen sclerosis is not itself cancerous, people with genital lichen sclerosis have a higher risk of genital SCC.

## DIAGNOSIS —

A healthcare professional can often diagnose lichen sclerosis by asking some questions and **examining your skin**, often with the help of a handheld magnifying tool (**dermatoscope**).

A **biopsy** may be done to confirm the diagnosis. This involves applying a numbing agent (local anaesthetic) then removing and sending a sample of the affected skin to the laboratory for testing.

## TREATMENT AND PREVENTION —

There is no cure for lichen sclerosis. However, **early treatment is essential** to manage symptoms and prevent complications such as scarring.

Strong ('potent' or 'ultrapotent') **steroid creams/ointments** are the main treatment. They are usually applied daily for 1–3 months, and less frequently once symptoms are controlled.

General **skincare measures** for affected areas include using a gentle/bland **moisturiser** and washing with plain water or a non-soap cleanser.

Post-menopausal women may also be prescribed a **vaginal oestrogen cream/pessary** that helps keep the tissues healthy.

Surgery is sometimes needed to remove scarring or areas that are suspicious for cancer.

## OUTCOME —

Lichen sclerosis is usually a long-term (chronic) condition that flares up and down over time. Regular, **long-term follow-up is recommended** to monitor the disease, adjust treatment as needed, and catch any genital skin cancers early.



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