

Pityriasis alba

CATEGORY:

Eczemas

LOOKS LIKE:

Pale (hypopigmented) patches of skin; round, oval, or irregularly shaped; 0.5–5 cm across; sometimes starts off pink

FEELS LIKE:

Scaly; sometimes itchy; sometimes raised

OUTLOOK:

Harmless; goes away on its own without treatment; skin returns to normal typically within a year

LOCATION:

Commonly affects the face, neck, upper arms, and upper chest/back



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE —



Pale patches on the face due to pityriasis alba



Pityriasis alba in a lighter skin type



Pityriasis alba in a darker skin type



Fine scale can often be seen overlying the pale areas



Pityriasis alba on the face in a child



Pityriasis alba on the arms

What is it?

Pityriasis alba is a **common**, **harmless** condition that causes patches of skin to become pale and scaly. Pityriasis means 'fine scale' and alba means 'white'.

It largely affects children and teenagers but can occur at any age. It also tends to be more common in people with eczema.

Pityriasis alba is easier to notice on people with darker skin tones, or tanned skin during summer.

It does not spread from person to person (**non-contagious**), and is not cancerous.

Pityriasis alba

CAUSES —

The cause of pityriasis alba is not known. It is thought to be **related to eczema**.

You are more likely to develop pityriasis alba if you or members of your family experience allergic conditions (sometimes called '**atopy**') eg, eczema, hay fever, asthma, and food allergies.

Pityriasis alba is not caused by an infection and is **not contagious**.

SYMPTOMS —

Pityriasis alba usually causes **1–20 patches on the skin** with the following features:

- Oval, round, or irregularly shaped
- **Paler than normal skin tone**; may start off as slightly pink-red
- 0.5–5 cm across in size
- Slightly scaly
- Occasionally itchy
- Flat or slightly raised
- More obvious when non-affected skin becomes tanned eg, in summer.

The rash is most common on the **face and upper body** (eg, the neck, shoulders, and upper body).

As it clears, the scaliness may go away first, while the skin colour can take longer to return to normal.

COMPLICATIONS —

Pityriasis alba **does not usually cause complications**.

Sometimes the following can be an issue:

- Itching and scratching — uncommon
- Infection — from bacteria, viruses, or fungi; dry, irritated, scratched skin is more easily infected
- Sunburn — increased risk of sunburn for affected pale patches of skin.

DIAGNOSIS —

A healthcare professional can usually diagnose pityriasis alba by asking a few questions and **examining your skin**. Examination may be aided by a handheld magnifying tool (**dermatoscope**) or a special black light lamp (**Wood's lamp**).

If unsure, they may do skin scrapings or a biopsy (skin sample) to rule out other causes.

- **Skin scrapings** are where some skin cells are brushed off using a blunt blade for a closer look under the microscope.
- A biopsy involves removing and sending part or all of the affected patch of skin to the laboratory for testing.

TREATMENT AND PREVENTION —

It isn't currently known how to prevent pityriasis alba from developing in the first place.

Treatment is generally not needed, as it is harmless and goes away without treatment over time.

However, options are available to reduce symptoms and possibly speed up healing. Most commonly, these include:

- **Moisturisers** for dryness and scaling
- Weak/mild **steroid cream/ointment** eg, 1% hydrocortisone for itching and redness.

Other treatments that are sometimes used include:

- Pimecrolimus or tacrolimus cream/ointment
- Ultraviolet light therapy (phototherapy) for widespread, persistent cases.

Sun protection is recommended to reduce sunburn risk and to prevent pityriasis alba from standing out further. To protect yourself from the sun:

- Apply sunscreen
- Wear sun protective clothing
- Avoid sunbeds
- Limit sun exposure, particularly during the middle of the day.

OUTCOME —

Pityriasis alba **clears on its own** and does not leave behind scars. It usually takes a few months to a year for affected skin to fully return to normal. It is possible for it to come back again.



<https://dermnetnz.org/topics/pityriasis-alba>