

PITYRIASIS CIRCINATA / ROSEOLA ANNULATA /  
HERPES TONSURANS MACULOSUS /  
CHRISTMAS TREE RASH

# Pityriasis rosea

## CATEGORY:

## Rashes

### LOOKS LIKE:

Patch/es on the skin;  
usually oval/round;  
may be pink/red,  
violet, brown, or grey  
depending on skin  
tone

### LOCATION:

Commonly affects the  
chest, abdomen, and  
back

### FEELS LIKE:

Scaly and slightly  
raised; sometimes  
itchy

### OUTLOOK:

Usually goes away on  
its own in 6–10 weeks;  
rarely comes back



## WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE —



Widespread scaly oval patches on the trunk in pityriasis rosea



Pityriasis rosea on the back; the largest patch was the first to appear ('herald patch')



Pink-red patches on the trunk in pityriasis rosea



Oval/round patches and rings on the upper chest



Scaly patches on the chest, a common site for pityriasis rosea



Pityriasis rosea sometimes affects body folds like the armpits (pictured) or groin

## What is it?

Pityriasis rosea is a harmless, common skin rash that typically clears up on its own in 6–10 weeks. It usually starts as one large patch (called the 'herald patch'), followed by a more widespread rash across the chest, abdomen, and back.

Pityriasis rosea largely affects teenagers and young adults, but it can occur at any age. It is slightly more common in women and tends to come up during winter.

Pityriasis rosea is not passed down in families, does not spread between people, and is not cancerous.

# Pityriasis rosea

## CAUSES —

The exact cause is unknown. It may be related to infections with bacteria or viruses, such as human herpesviruses 6 and 7 (HHV-6/7). Occasionally, certain medications or vaccines may trigger it.

## SYMPTOMS —

Pityriasis rosea is a **rash** that can be **itchy**. Some people have flu-like symptoms such as a cough or sore throat a few days before the rash appears.

The rash generally develops in **two stages**.

Stage 1 is the '**herald patch**':

- A single, large (2–5 cm wide), slightly raised, round or oval patch
- Usually has a scaly border ('collarette')
- Typically appears on the chest, back, or abdomen but can occur anywhere
- Looks salmon-pink or red on lighter skin and brown/grey/violet on darker skin tones.

Stage 2 is a **more widespread rash** that follows within a few days to two weeks:

- Looks like numerous smaller herald patches
- Commonly found on the chest and back
- Often spreads from top-down and along the rib lines in a 'Christmas tree' pattern.

It is not uncommon for new patches to keep coming up for a while before the rash goes away.

Some people, especially **children**, develop an **unusual (atypical) rash** which may:

- Appear in less common places eg, the armpits, face, scalp, or inside the mouth
- Look or feel different eg, blisters; tiny spots or bruises; raised hives; or target-like rings (where the rash looks like a 'bull's eye')
- Skip Stage 1 or have multiple herald patches
- Skip Stage 2
- Cause intense itching
- Last longer or keep coming back.

## COMPLICATIONS —

Pityriasis rosea may leave behind spots or patches that are lighter (**hypopigmentation**) or darker (**hyperpigmentation**) than your natural skin colour, especially if you have dark skin. For most people, skin colour changes will return to normal after a few months.

Getting pityriasis rosea during pregnancy, particularly in the first 15 weeks, is usually not harmful but has very rarely been linked with miscarriage or early (premature) birth.

## DIAGNOSIS —

A healthcare professional can usually diagnose pityriasis rosea by asking a few questions and examining your skin, sometimes with a handheld magnifying tool (dermatoscope). If unsure, they may do blood tests, skin swabs or scrapings, or a biopsy (skin sample) to rule out other causes and confirm the diagnosis.

## TREATMENT AND PREVENTION —

There is no known way to prevent pityriasis rosea.

Pityriasis rosea clears up on its own, but treatments are available to improve itch or speed up healing.

- For **mild to moderate itch**: antihistamines, steroid creams, moisturisers, & soothing lotions (eg, calamine, zinc oxide) can help.
- For **severe itch** or a **long-lasting rash**: your doctor may prescribe steroid pills, antiviral medication (eg, aciclovir), or light therapy.

If your pityriasis rosea was triggered by a medication, this should be stopped.

## OUTCOME —

Pityriasis rosea usually goes away on its own after 6–10 weeks and does not leave behind scars. Occasionally, the rash can continue for several months. Once cleared, it is rare for pityriasis rosea to come back.

Please see a doctor if:

- You are pregnant
- Your rash lasts longer than 3 months or gets worse despite suggested treatment
- New or severe symptoms develop.



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

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