

## feature

### Hepatitis C symptom #2:

# Skin problems



Written by Dr Nicholas Turnbull  
Consultant Dermatologist  
Waitemata DHB

**Skin problems are common and often distressing for those with hepatitis C. They may be related to liver damage, the virus itself, or various treatments. Liver problems may influence treatment of skin conditions, as the liver is important for processing many medications.**

**Some of the skin conditions listed below are less common than others, but should be considered.**

Skin rashes may develop as a result of acute infection, chronic infection and liver damage. The hepatitis C virus is known to be associated with various skin problems, regardless of whether the liver is damaged or not. Skin problems are seen in approximately 20 per cent of people with hepatitis C.

Some skin problems are common and not specific to hepatitis C infection or liver disease. For example, spider angiomas (small vascular markings often found on the body and face) are common in pregnant women and those without hepatitis C or liver disease.



Common skin problems found in those with liver dysfunction include:

- stretch marks (striae)
- acne
- nail changes
- red palms (palmar erythema)
- white/brown spots or patches (pigmentary changes)
- hair changes i.e. texture or loss of hair
- painful skin ulcers (pyoderma gangrenosum)
- hives (urticaria)

- tight or thickened skin (which involves other organs)
- dry and itchy skin.

Hepatitis C has been associated with skin conditions including:

- shiny flat topped, often itchy, bumps (lichen planus)
- scaly or blistered purple or red marks on hands and feet (acral necrolytic erythema)
- inflammation of blood vessels (vasculitis)
- red lumps on shins (erythema nodosum)
- damage and blistering after exposure to sunlight (porphyria cutanea tarda).

Itchy skin is especially common. Problems can arise when the skin gets infected, which usually happens due to scratching. Spreading redness, warmth, swelling, pus, pain, fevers, nausea or shivering are worrying signs and you should see your doctor urgently. Similarly, extensive rashes or break down of skin should prompt you to see your doctor or nurse specialist. Any new rash or skin lumps should be seen by your health care provider, even if for reassurance, as skin conditions are more complicated for those with hepatitis C infection.

#### Skin issues related to hepatitis C treatment

Drugs used in managing hepatitis C can cause or aggravate skin conditions. Pegylated interferon can accelerate skin problems such as lichen planus and psoriasis (itchy skin). Ribavirin commonly causes an eczema or psoriasis-like rash early on in hepatitis C treatment. Often the rash is managed by moisturisers and temporary topical steroids, as well as by avoiding soaps. Sometimes dosage adjustment or temporarily stopping ribavirin treatment is required. Ribavirin can be started again once the rash disappears. Interestingly, the rash rarely occurs once ribavirin treatment has been recommenced. A light-sensitive rash has also been reported with ribavirin.

Management of skin problems related to hepatitis C may be challenging and, unfortunately, one treatment cannot fix all. Refer to page 11 for tips on managing dry and itchy skin.

Try not to scratch. This can actually make you more itchy, or worse, introduce infection into the skin or blood.



Avoid perfumes and fragrances (particularly in your moisturisers and shampoos).



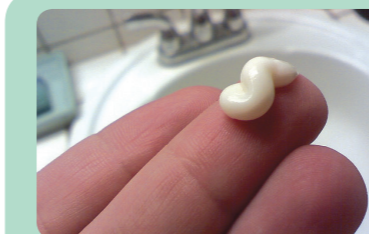
Avoid soaps as these dry out the skin. If you require soap, use a soap substitute. They are readily available but take advice from your doctor, pharmacist or dermatologist about their use.



Avoid long hot showers and baths as these dry out the skin and aggravate itchy dry skin. Use moisturiser after your shower or bath.

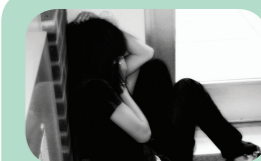


Keep well hydrated.



Moisturise at least twice a day. Ask your care provider when and how best to use moisturisers. Do not neglect their use.

## Tips for managing dry and itchy skin



Depression is a significantly under-recognised problem in people with skin problems. Talk about your mood with your health care provider. Undiagnosed depression can make managing symptoms, such as itchy skin and pain, very challenging.

Protect your skin from dust, solvents, detergents and other irritants. Too much washing (i.e. showers or hand washing), even just with water, can dry out the skin.

Avoid tight restrictive clothing or overheating yourself. Keep yourself cool. Loose fitting clothing with natural fibres that can breathe are best.

Topical steroids and related medications can be useful treatments. Know what you are treating, how to use them and the duration of the course of treatment. Unsupervised use of these treatments can be ineffective and have important side-effects.



In my experience your family doctor is excellent at recognising and managing these hepatitis-related skin problems. A gastroenterologist, nurse specialist or dermatologist can help your primary care provider where the diagnosis is unclear or treatment has been difficult or complicated.