

LICHEN SCLEROSUS

What is it?

Lichen sclerosus is an inflammation of the skin of unknown cause. It can occur anywhere on the body but most commonly it affects the skin surrounding the vulva and anus. It is often seen at the time of the menopause or before puberty but can occur at any age. The main symptom is itch. In long-standing disease there may be an alteration of the normal anatomy of the vulva. The clitoris becomes buried under the skin and the labia minora may disappear. The entry to the vagina may become narrowed resulting in difficult and painful intercourse. The skin around the anus may crack which causes painful defaecation. Sometimes there is a family history of this skin condition.

How do you diagnose this condition?

The patients presenting symptoms and the physical appearance of the vulva are often enough to make a diagnosis. However, a skin biopsy is needed to make a definite diagnosis. A skin biopsy is done in the office under a local anaesthetic.

How do you treat this condition?

It is important to follow the guidelines regarding appropriate skin care and vulvar hygiene. The most successful treatment is a steroid ointment that is used once a day initially, usually at night. A 30-g jar will last you at least three months, and is quite safe. If you are pregnant or intend to get pregnant, let your doctor know.

You will have been prescribed: Elocom 0.1% ointment or _____

First month: Once at night, apply a thin layer of the ointment to the affected areas, not forgetting the skin around the anus if this is involved too.

Second month: Apply on alternate nights.

Third month: Apply twice a week (eg. Mondays and Thursdays or on weekends Saturdays & Sundays)

Maintenance: After this time, you should only need to use your ointment once or twice a week. You may continue to decrease the applications to once per week or once a fortnight. You may stop the medication if you are checking the vulvar skin on a regular basis.

Flare-ups: Restart nightly application for 1 week. If the symptoms do not resolve after one week of using nightly treatments see your doctor.

Normally you will be reviewed after your first eight weeks of treatment. It may take up to one month for your symptoms to resolve once you start treatment, and up to three months for the skin to look normal. Once your condition is stable you will only have to be seen every year – it is important part of your annual physical exam for the doctor to examine your vulvar skin. There is a small association (4%) of this skin condition with vulvar skin cancer and therefore any suspicious lesions should be biopsied.