

Definition

Named for the Greek word *psora* meaning "itch," psoriasis is a chronic, non-contagious disease characterized by inflamed lesions covered with silvery-white scabs of dead skin.

Description

Psoriasis, which affects at least four million Americans, is slightly more common in women than in men. Although the disease can develop at any time, 10–15% of all cases are diagnosed in children under 10, and the average age at the onset of symptoms is 28. Psoriasis is most common in fair-skinned people and extremely rare in dark-skinned individuals.

Normal skin cells mature and replace dead skin every 28–30 days. Psoriasis causes skin cells to mature in less than a week. Because the body can't shed old skin as rapidly as new cells are rising to the surface, raised patches of dead skin develop on the arms, back, chest, elbows, legs, nails, folds between the buttocks, and scalp.

Psoriasis is considered mild if it affects less than 5% of the surface of the body; moderate, if 5–30% of the skin is involved, and severe, if the disease affects more than 30% of the body surface.

Types of psoriasis

Dermatologists distinguish different forms of psoriasis according to what part of the body is affected, how severe symptoms are, how long they last, and the pattern formed by the scales.

PLAQUE PSORIASIS. Plaque psoriasis (*psoriasis vulgaris*), the most common form of the disease, is characterized by small, red bumps that enlarge, become inflamed, and form scales. The top scales flake off easily and often, but those beneath the surface of the skin clump together. Removing these scales exposes tender skin, which bleeds and causes the plaques (inflamed patches) to grow.

Plaque psoriasis can develop on any part of the body, but most often occurs on the elbows, knees, scalp, and trunk.

SCALP PSORIASIS. At least 50 of every 100 people who have any form of psoriasis have scalp psoriasis. This form of the disease is characterized by scale-capped plaques on the surface of the skull.

NAIL PSORIASIS. The first sign of nail psoriasis is usually pitting of the fingernails or toenails. Size, shape, and depth of the marks vary, and affected nails may thicken, yellow, or crumble. The skin around an affected nail is sometimes inflamed, and the nail may peel away from the nail bed.

GUTTATE PSORIASIS. Named for the Latin word *gutta*, which means "a drop," guttate psoriasis is characterized by small, red, drop-like dots that enlarge rapidly and may be somewhat scaly. Often found on the arms, legs, and trunk and sometimes in the scalp, guttate psoriasis can clear up without treatment or disappear and resurface in the form of plaque psoriasis.

PUSTULAR PSORIASIS. Pustular psoriasis usually occurs in adults. It is characterized by blister-like lesions filled with non-infectious pus and surrounded by reddened skin. Pustular psoriasis, which can be limited to one part of the body (localized) or can be widespread, may be the first symptom of psoriasis or develop in a patient with chronic plaque psoriasis.

Generalized pustular psoriasis is also known as Von Zumbusch pustular psoriasis. Widespread, acutely painful patches of inflamed skin develop suddenly. Pustules appear within a few hours, then dry and peel within two days.

Generalized pustular psoriasis can make life-threatening demands on the heart and kidneys.

Palmar-plantar pustulosis (PPP) generally appears between the ages of 20 and 60. PPP causes large pustules to form at the base of the thumb or on the sides of the heel. In time, the pustules turn brown and peel. The disease usually becomes much less active for a while after peeling.

Acrodermatitis continua of Hallopeau is a form of PPP characterized by painful, often disabling, lesions on the fingertips or the tips of the toes. The nails may become deformed, and the disease can damage bone in the affected area.

INVERSE PSORIASIS. Inverse psoriasis occurs in the armpits and groin, under the breasts, and in other areas where skin flexes or folds. This disease is characterized by smooth, inflamed lesions and can be debilitating.

ERYTHRODERMIC PSORIASIS. Characterized by severe scaling, itching, and pain that affects most of the body, erythrodermic psoriasis disrupts the body's chemical balance and can cause severe illness. This particularly inflammatory form of psoriasis can be the first sign of the disease, but often develops in patients with a history of plaque psoriasis.

PSORIATIC ARTHRITIS. About 10% of patients with psoriasis develop a complication called psoriatic arthritis. This type of arthritis can be slow to develop and mild, or it can develop rapidly. Symptoms of psoriatic arthritis include:
joint discomfort, swelling, stiffness, or throbbing
swelling in the toes and ankles
pain in the digits, lower back, wrists, knees, and ankles
eye inflammation or pink eye (conjunctivitis).

Causes and symptoms

The cause of psoriasis is unknown, but research suggests that an immune-system malfunction triggers the disease. Factors that increase the risk of developing psoriasis include:

family history
stress
exposure to cold temperatures
injury, illness, or infection
steroids and other medications
race

Trauma and certain bacteria may trigger psoriatic arthritis in patients with psoriasis.

Prevention

psoriasis symptoms appear or reappear after treatment
pustules erupt on the skin and the patient experiences fatigue, muscle aches, and fever
unfamiliar, unexplained symptoms appear