

Scaly Scalp - Patient Information

What is scaly scalp?

Scaly scalp is a common problem and usually causes flaking and itching.

What causes scaly scalp?

A number of different conditions can cause scaly scalp:

Dandruff. Skin cells are lost from everyone's scalp each day, but if more cells than usual are lost, they clump together to form white or grey flakes of dandruff. Dandruff affects men and women equally and can cause irritation and itching.

Psoriasis. This skin condition is very common and while people of any age can be affected, it usually begins between the ages of 15 and 35. Psoriasis often affects the scalp, where red areas covered in thick silvery scales appear under the hair. Scalp psoriasis can be stubborn and difficult to treat and may look unsightly, but it is not infectious.

Seborrheic eczema. This may also be called seborrheic dermatitis. In children and adults, seborrheic eczema causes itchy, scaly patches on the scalp. It can also affect the eyebrows, face, ears, and the upper parts of the body.

"Cradle cap". In babies this condition causes greasy, yellow scales to appear on the scalp, giving a crusty appearance. This can spread to the face and body.

How is scaly scalp treated?

If you have mild dandruff or seborrheic eczema it will usually improve if you use a medicated shampoo once or twice a week. Medicated shampoos are available from pharmacies without a prescription. If use of a medicated shampoo is not successful the condition may respond to a preparation containing salicylic acid or coal tar, which will help to remove the scales—ask us about this. Unfortunately the problem may return if treatment is stopped so you may need to continue one or more of these treatments for some time.

When should I see my doctor?

If your scalp problem does not clear up, you should see us and we will examine your scalp. If you have eczema we will check that it is not infected. If you do have an infection we may prescribe antibiotics.

Self-help measures

- Do not use more than the recommended amount of prescribed cream or lotion or shampoo to reduce the risk of side effects.
- Do not wash your scalp too frequently as this can dry your skin and encourage scaling and flakiness.
- Be careful when using hair styling products as they can irritate your scalp and make your condition worse.
- If your scalp is itchy, rub it gently. Your skin is delicate and can be damaged or become infected if you scratch it.
- Tar-based products can stain, so use old sheets and pillow cases.
- If you have blonde hair, avoid shampoos containing tar, which may discolor your hair.

Further information

National Eczema Association: www.nationaleczema.org

National Psoriasis Foundation: www.psoriasis.org