

# Itchy Scalp and Dandruff

This fact sheet helps you to know what's 'normal' and what you can expect to happen if you suffer from an Itchy Scalp. It also tells you when you should become concerned and seek advice from a health professional.

## Useful facts

- **What is an Itchy or flaky scalp?** Itching is caused by dryness and inflammation, flaking is due to shedding of old dead skin cells at a faster than usual rate.
- **What are the causes of an itchy or flaky scalp?** This can be due to:
  - Seborrhaeic dermatitis** – a common skin condition due to overgrowth of yeast on the skin. In babies this is called cradle cap.
  - Tinea capitis** – a fungal infection and also called scalp ringworm.
  - Eczema** – a common skin condition that causes skin to be dry, red, flaky and very itchy.
  - Allergic contact dermatitis** – a reaction to products such as hair dye, spray, gel or mousse.
  - Psoriasis** – a skin condition that causes red, flaky crusty patches of skin covered with silvery scales.
  - Head lice** – small whitish insects.
- **Is it contagious?** Headlice are spread by direct head to head contact. Tinea Capitis is usually caught by direct contact with animals, not usually direct human contact. The fungus can also contaminate hairbrushes, towels etc.

## What can I expect to happen?

- ✓ For most people, symptoms can improve within a few weeks with treatment.
- ✓ Once your symptoms improve you should be able to use the treatment less often but they may come back if you stop using it completely.

## What can I do myself to get better – now and in the future?

- ✓ **Shampoo** The main treatment is medicated shampoo. Look for shampoo containing zinc pyrithione, salicylic acid, selenium sulphide, ketoconazole, or coal tar. Leave the shampoo for 5 minutes before washing it out.
- ✓ **Nit treatment** If you suspect headlice, you can use specific "nit" lotions or sprays, or use a specially designed comb.

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- ✓ **Sharing** If you suspect ringworm or headlice, avoid sharing combs, hairbrushes, hats, towels, pillowcase or helmets with other people.
- ✓ **Avoidance** Avoid things that seem to irritate your scalp.
- ✓ **Natural treatments** Many people find tea tree containing products helpful, but avoid neat tea tree on sore patches as it might sting.

## When should I seek medical help?

Seek advice from your pharmacist or GP if treatment with antidandruff shampoos for more than a month doesn't work for you, or if any of the following symptoms are present:

- **Quality of life** Your scalp is very itchy and impairing your quality of life.
- **Appearance** Your scalp is red, swollen or weepy.
- **Immune system** You have a weakened immune system. For example, having chemotherapy or you have HIV or you are taking medication that suppresses your immune system.

## Where can I find out more?

Visit **NHS Choices** (<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Dandruff/Pages/Introduction.aspx>).

Remember that your pharmacist can also help you with assessing your symptoms and advise on suitable treatments.



111 is the NHS non-emergency number. It's fast, easy and free. Call 111 and speak to a highly trained adviser, supported by healthcare professionals. They will ask you a series of questions to assess your symptoms and immediately direct you to the best medical care for you.

NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.