

# What is acanthosis nigricans?

Acanthosis nigricans (AN) is a skin condition that presents with brownish discoloration and thickening of the skin. It typically affects the skin folds. The neck and armpits are more frequently involved. It can occur in other areas like the inside of the elbows, the knuckles, and around the mouth. The affected skin can become thickened and look velvety. It usually doesn't hurt. Sometimes it can be itchy.

## WHY DO PEOPLE GET ACANTHOSIS NIGRICANS?

Growth factors are small molecules that increase skin growth. When too many growth factors are produced, the skin becomes thicker. Some of these growth factors come from fat cells. People that have more fat cells are at higher risk for developing AN. Being overweight can lead to high levels of these growth factors in the blood. Higher blood levels can cause the skin to become thicker and browner.

## WHO GETS ACANTHOSIS NIGRICANS?

Most people who have AN have some resistance to insulin. Insulin is a hormone that allows your body to process sugar. Resistance to insulin can be seen in some people who have diabetes, a high cholesterol level, a thyroid disorder, or other hormone problems. These conditions can be detected through blood tests ordered by your doctor. If AN is diagnosed your doctor might want to rule out these conditions.

## IS ACANTHOSIS NIGRICANS ALWAYS ASSOCIATED WITH UNDERLYING HEALTH PROBLEMS?

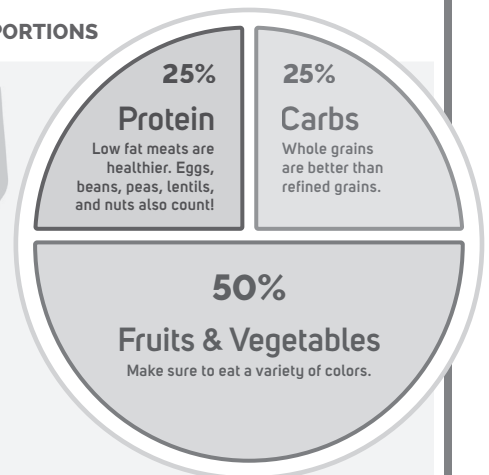
Not everyone that has AN has other health problems. People with naturally darker skin can also have thick, velvety skin in some areas, but be in good health otherwise. Since AN may be the first sign of beginning insulin resistance, it is important to focus on a healthy lifestyle to prevent future problems. AN is an early sign for you to make lifestyle changes to reduce the risk of developing insulin resistance.

## HOW IS ACANTHOSIS NIGRICANS DIAGNOSED?

Your doctor can diagnose AN by a skin exam. Other tests are rarely needed to make the diagnosis. Your doctor may recommend blood tests to check for underlying health problems. Blood tests might include a glucose level, thyroid function, liver function, and lipid levels.

A healthy diet, reducing sugar intake, exercise, and lifestyle changes are the best steps to improving acanthosis nigricans and preventing complications from insulin resistance; this is something you may want to discuss with your primary care doctor or a nutritionist.

### MEAL PORTIONS



More helpful information can be found at <https://myplate.gov/eat-healthy>

### TIPS ON STAYING ACTIVE

- » Regular physical activity can help a person lose weight and control blood glucose levels among other benefits.
- » Generally, it is recommended that people be physically active for at least **30 minutes, 5 days per week**.
- » Physical activity may include brisk walking, jogging, climbing stairs, swimming, dancing, and other aerobic activities.

## HOW IS ACANTHOSIS NIGRICANS TREATED?

Medicines and creams are not particularly useful in reversing the skin changes. This is because the skin itself is normal, it is just reacting to the excess growth factors.

Because the condition is driven by the fat cells in the body, the most important management is weight loss. In many people this can help reverse the skin appearance back to normal. A healthy diet and increased exercise are strongly recommended.

Treatment might also be based on your blood test results if there are abnormalities. Sometimes hormonal abnormalities can be corrected and lead to improvement of the condition.

Topical creams may be prescribed but are generally not very effective. They can also sometimes cause irritation. It is better to address the primary cause of the condition.



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