

What is lichen sclerosis?

Lichen sclerosis is an uncommon condition that usually affects the genital skin. It causes areas of the skin to become white and thinner. It is not contagious. It can last for years and can cause significant problems like pain, bleeding or itch.

WHO GETS LICHEN SCLEROSUS?

Anyone can get lichen sclerosis. It usually affects older women or children before puberty. Girls are more likely to have lichen sclerosis than boys.

WHAT CAUSES LICHEN SCLEROSUS?

We do not know what causes lichen sclerosis. We know it is not an infection and it is not contagious. It is considered an autoimmune disease. It may run in some families. Most children with lichen sclerosis are completely healthy. A few children with lichen sclerosis can develop other medical conditions such as autoimmune thyroid disease.

HOW DOES LICHEN SCLEROSUS PRESENT?

In girls, lichen sclerosis usually affects the skin around the vulva or the anus. It may cause patches of dry, tight, or white skin.

In boys, the most commonly involved area is the foreskin. This area can become white and scar, causing phimosis (when the foreskin is too tight and cannot retract). If the tip of the penis is affected, the skin can feel firm and look white and scars can develop. Scarring in this area can lead to narrowing of the urethra, which is the tube that lets urine out of the body.

In some children, lichen sclerosis causes no symptoms at all. Other times it is itchy or painful. Patients might complain of soreness in the genital area. Bruises or blood blisters can also be present in the affected area. Scratching can worsen bleeding. Sometimes, small tears can appear in the skin and cause pain when passing urine or bowel movements. If there is discomfort with bowel movements, this can lead to constipation. Ongoing or severe skin changes can lead to scarring or adhesions (areas where skin sticks to itself).

Although lichen sclerosis is more likely to be found in the genital area, in rare occasions it can affect other parts of the body.

HOW DO WE DIAGNOSE LICHEN SCLEROSUS?

Lichen sclerosis can usually be diagnosed with a complete medical history and physical exam. The doctor will suspect the diagnosis by listening to the child's story and symptoms and then by carefully examining the genital and perianal skin. Sometimes a small piece of skin (a skin biopsy) may need to be taken to confirm the diagnosis.

DO YOU NEED TO TREAT LICHEN SCLEROSUS?

Yes. All children with lichen sclerosis should be treated, even if they have no symptoms at all. Lichen sclerosis can slowly progress over many years, and if it is not treated and monitored, it can cause permanent scarring. These scars over the clitoris or vaginal opening can cause other symptoms or problems. A link to skin cancer has been noted in adults. However, with treatment and monitoring, these complications can be avoided.

HOW DO WE TREAT LICHEN SCLEROSUS?

Children can minimize symptoms of lichen sclerosis by avoiding any activities that irritate the genital skin. They should avoid soaps and bubble baths around this area. Talcum powder should also be avoided. Avoid tight or rubbing clothing. Regular bland moisturizer can be used around the genital and perianal area after bathing. Ointments are preferred. Girls should not be using vaginal wash products at any time.

Treatment should be supervised by a doctor with experience in this condition. The best treatment for lichen sclerosis is a potent corticosteroid ointment applied to the affected skin. These ointments are used for many weeks to get the lichen sclerosis under control. When the appearance has returned to normal, treatment is gradually weaned. To prevent recurrence, weaning may take months or years. In boys, significant lichen sclerosis involving the foreskin can be improved with circumcision.

Many children with lichen sclerosis experience improvement in the disease around puberty. However, all patients who have been treated for lichen sclerosis should have a medical check-up each year or two into adulthood.

WHAT ARE COMPLICATIONS OF LICHEN SCLEROSUS?

Infections can be seen in patients with lichen sclerosis. This is the most common complication seen in these patients. If there are sudden changes such as discharge, blisters or odor in the area, it should be brought to the attention of your doctor. If an infection is diagnosed, this might require other treatment. Lichen sclerosis can also lead to scarring and problems passing urine.

SKIN CARE FOR AREAS AFFECTED WITH LICHEN SCLEROSUS

- Gentle skin care is advised.
- Wash the area once or twice a day with gentle cleanser.
- Apply prescription medication.
- Moisturizers can be used after prescription medication.



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