

LICHEN SCLEROSUS

What is lichen sclerosis?

Lichen sclerosis (LS) is a skin condition that affects the skin of the vulva and anus in women (and more rarely the penis of men). The skin of the vulva and around the anus becomes thin, white and fragile. It usually causes severe itching and sometimes a burning sensation and pain although occasionally there are no symptoms. It can cause scarring of the vulva and sometimes bruises, blood blisters or raw areas can develop after scratching or on their own. Because the skin can become tight and fragile it can cause problems with intercourse, passing urine and passing bowel motions.

What causes lichen sclerosis?

We do not know what causes lichen sclerosis but it is not infectious, it is not cancerous and it is not sexually transmitted. It is probably one of the autoimmune diseases (like diabetes and thyroid disease when the immune system malfunctions slightly and attacks its own tissues). It can occur at any age although it is most common in women over 50. Pre-pubertal girls can also be affected. In 10-20% of people it also occurs on other areas of the body usually as scattered white spots.

How is lichen sclerosis treated?

Lichen sclerosis is usually treated with a steroid cream or ointment. This form of treatment is usually very effective even if the condition has been present for many years. The ointment (usually Dermovate ointment) should be applied as follows:

Once daily at night until symptoms have gone, then
Alternate days at night for 4 weeks, then
Twice weekly for 4 weeks

If your symptoms return when the frequency of application is reduced resume treatment at the frequency that was effective.

You should also use a greasy moisturiser regularly over the whole area and instead of soap.

Is it safe to use a steroid cream in this area?

Yes it is completely safe to use steroid creams and ointments in the genital area for this condition. You will probably require at least one 30g tube of ointment to get the condition under control and then it is generally recommended that a further 30g tube should last for about 6 months. Once the itching and pain has subsided and your doctor has examined you to make sure that the LS appears inactive your doctor will recommend that you only use the ointment if your symptoms return. If this happens use it again until your symptoms settle completely.

Is there a chance that lichen sclerosis may turn into cancer?

There is a very small increased risk of cancer in this area in patients with lichen sclerosis. This is probably higher in patients who do not have any treatment. Signs to watch out for are a sore, area of thickening or ulcer that does not heal in a few weeks despite treatment. If you are concerned about

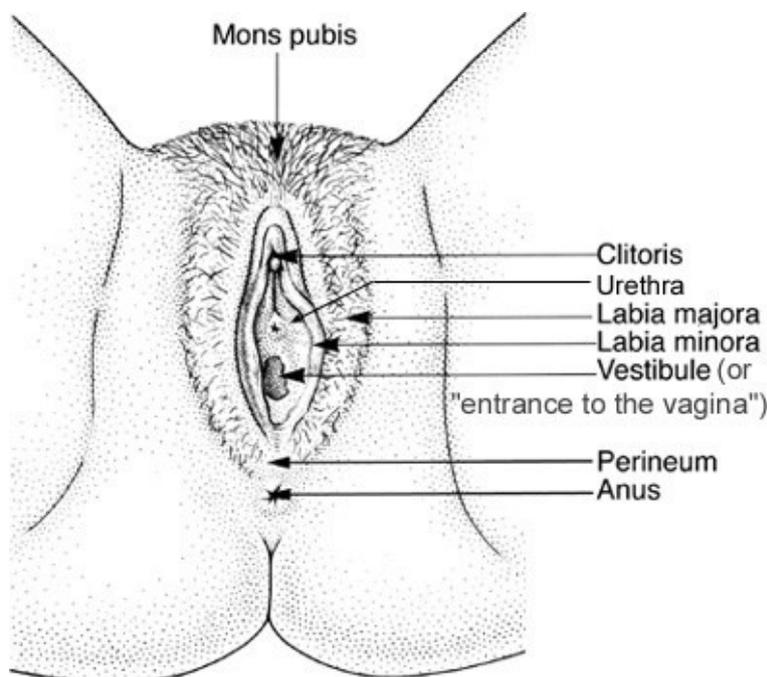
an area contact your consultant's secretary for an earlier appointment or ask your GP to examine the area. It may simply be that your treatment needs to be changed but occasionally a biopsy is needed to rule out cancerous changes.

General care of the vulva

Vulval skin is thinner than skin elsewhere and can be more susceptible to irritation, particularly if you have lichen sclerosus.

Many products even the so-called 'hypoallergenic' products can irritate the skin. If you have vulval symptoms it is sensible to try and stick to the following general advice:

- Avoid all soap, bubble-baths, deodorants, wipes from coming into contact with the vulval area (avoid washing hair in the bath)
- Use a bland greasy moisturiser instead of soap and if it helps apply it regularly for pain, irritation or itching
- Clean the vulval area only once a day, excessive washing can cause further irritation.
- Wear loose fitting cotton underwear
- Add an extra rinse cycle when washing underwear, fabric conditioners and washing powders can irritate the vulval skin
- If passing water makes your symptoms worse, try washing the urine away from the vulval area using a jug of warm water whilst on the toilet
- Make sure you only use prescribed creams or ointments
- Ensure you know where to apply the cream or ointment, if in doubt, ask your doctor
- It is helpful to use a mirror to familiarise yourself with the appearance of your vulva, that way you will be able to spot any changes



For further information contact:

National Lichen Sclerosus Support Group (NLSSG)

Write to Fabia Brackenbury
Flat 91 Homecourt House, Bartholomew Street West, Exeter EX4 3AE

Website: www.lichensclerosus.org

The Vulval Pain Society (VPS)

PO Box 7804
Nottingham
NG3 5ZQ

Website: www.vulvalpainsociety.org
Or search for the Vulval Pain Society on Facebook

The vulval health awareness campaign (VHAC)

Website: www.vulvalhealthawarenesscampaign.org
Telephone 07765 947599

The British Society for the Study of Vulval Disease

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