

Lichen Planus

Lichen planus is a skin condition that causes shiny, firm bumps to appear on the skin. It may appear on the inside of the mouth as well as the skin. It is not contagious, meaning you cannot give it to someone else or catch it from another person. It can affect people of any age, but is more common in middle-aged adults.

What does lichen planus look like?

When lichen planus appears on the skin it often causes itchy, shiny, flat bumps that are a reddish-purple colour. The bumps commonly appear on the wrists, lower back and ankles, but they can appear anywhere on skin or mucous membranes. If you have lichen planus on your legs the bumps may appear darker in colour than in other places. Most people have just a few bumps, but the rash can be more widespread and appear on several parts of the body. Rarely, lichen planus can affect the skin on the scalp.

Sometimes there are small white lines going through the bumps, known as Wickham's striae. Some people develop patches of rough, scaly skin when the bumps keep appearing in the same place – this is more likely with bumps on the ankles and skins. Bumps are itchy for some people but not others.

If the condition affects the inside of your mouth and other mucous membranes, such as the genital area, it may appear as lacy, white patches that can be painful. It can also appear on the inside of the cheeks, on the tongue and gums. Sometimes redness, swelling and open sores develop.

Lichen planus may also change the appearance of your nails, causing ridges, splitting or thinning of the toenails and fingernails. Some people may lose some of their nails.

What causes lichen planus ?

Lichen planus may be a type of autoimmune disease, which means that your body's own immune system mistakenly attacks itself. Normally the immune system protects the body against infection and disease. In the case of lichen planus, your body's immune system attacks your skin cells and mucous membranes. The exact cause for this is unknown. A rare type of lichen planus (familial bullous lichen planus) seems to run in families.

A lichen planus-type rash may also be caused by some medicines, including diuretics and anti-malarial medication. Rarely, metal tooth fillings may cause it to develop inside the mouth. There may be an association between lichen planus and hepatitis C infection.

How is lichen planus diagnosed?

A dermatologist can often diagnose lichen planus by looking at your skin, nails and mouth. They may confirm the diagnosis by taking a scraping of affected skin (a biopsy) and examining it under a microscope. Sometimes you may have a blood test to check for other medical conditions. Dentists may also recognise lichen planus when it affects the inside of your mouth.

What else can I do about lichen planus?

If you have lichen planus on your skin, it may be helpful to try the following:

- Avoid scratching the bumps if possible (covering them with a bandage may help).
- Reduce the itch by applying a cool cloth or oatmeal bath treatment.
- Reduce stress.
- If lichen planus affects your mouth you should make sure you maintain good dental health and see your dentist regularly.
- Stop smoking.
- Avoid alcohol or minimise your alcohol intake.
- Brush and floss your teeth twice daily.
- Attend recommended check ups with your dermatologist or dentist to check for signs of oral (mouth) cancer.
- Avoid foods that can aggravate lichen planus: spicy foods, tomatoes, citrus fruits and juices, crispy, salty snacks (e.g. potato chips and corn chips), drinks that contain caffeine (e.g. coffee, tea and cola).

Treatment

There is no cure for lichen planus. The rash often goes away by itself, usually within 2 years. It recurs in about 20% of people. If you are bothered by pain or have a lot of itching, your dermatologist may prescribe medication to help ease the symptoms and speed the healing process.

Treatments may include:

- Topical (applied to the skin) corticosteroid cream or ointment: to reduce redness and swelling.
- Antihistamines: to reduce itching.
- Ultraviolet light therapy: to help speed the healing process.
- Oral medication (pills).

Red or open sores on the genitals require treatment by your dermatologist. It is also important to get treatment if your scalp or nails are affected.