

Psoriasis Defined

Psoriasis is a chronic condition that can manifest in the skin, nails, scalp and joints. It is a surprisingly common condition and affects up to one percent of the population in most countries. It appears to be more common in Europe and in North America and is least common among black West Africans and Latin Americans. Psoriasis affects men and women equally and can start at any age but often occurs for the first time in five to 9 year old girls and fifteen to nineteen year old boys.

No one knows for certain what causes psoriasis. Psoriasis may run in your family (hereditary), or it may have been brought on by certain medication, stress or an infection. One thing is certain, psoriasis is not contagious and is not caused by a virus, bacteria or poor hygiene. Many people find that their psoriasis comes and goes and disappears for months or even years at a time. The condition may start slowly, with just a few small patches or more explosively, especially after a sore throat caused by a streptococcal infection.

It is very hard to predict whether psoriasis will worsen, improve or will remain the same throughout your life. Psoriasis tends to remain a lifelong problem, although there will be many periods when it will improve and others when it gets worse. There is no cure for psoriasis, although it can disappear of its own accord.

Psoriasis causes pink or red raised patches of skin. These patches are called plaques and can vary in size. These plaques are caused by abnormal skin cell replacement. Your skin constantly replaces its outermost layer (epidermis) because the cells get rubbed off by going about your daily life. In people with psoriasis these cells are replaced too quickly, are not formed properly and appear to get 'heaped' into plaques. The plaques appear pink/red because the underlying blood vessels are damaged.

Psoriasis can occur on any part of the body including the scalp. It can also manifest on the palms of the hands or on the soles of the feet, where it can appear as blisters. These blisters (or pustules) are caused by white blood cells accumulating in the affected plaques. This type of psoriasis can be painful, rather than itchy and sufferers may find it painful to walk or to use their hands.

When psoriasis affects the nails, they can become thickened and damaged. The nail will often contain ridges and pits and can sometimes separate from the nail bed (this is known as onycholysis). People with psoriasis of the nails often notice that their nails grow more quickly than normal, and good care by a professional manicurist/pedicurist is recommended, and it will help disguise the appearance of your nails.