
What triggers psoriasis and what makes it worse?



Introduction

As mentioned earlier in this book, genetic changes can give you the tendency to develop psoriasis, but some trigger is needed to start the process off. A variety of trigger factors have been identified, but more research is needed, especially into why some areas of the skin will develop psoriatic plaques whereas other areas remain normal. It can be very difficult to make generalisations from what we call ‘anecdotal evidence’ of individual patients’ beliefs about triggers, but the following list reflects those events or things which do seem able to have an effect on all patients with psoriasis at some time:

- stress and emotional upset;
- infection;
- injury to the skin – even a simple scratch or insect bite;
- puberty, menopause and pregnancy (changes in hormone levels);
- some prescribed drugs (e.g. beta-blockers, chloroquine and lithium);
- alcohol in excess;
- smoking;
- poor general health;
- changes in climate;
- severe damage to the immune system (e.g. with AIDS or after chemotherapy for cancer);
- exposure to ultraviolet light (rarely).

Diet

Does diet affect psoriasis?

There is little scientific evidence that suggests a direct link between diet and psoriasis. It is wise for everyone to have a healthy balanced diet that contains lots of fresh fruit and vegetables (at least five portions per day), and to drink plenty of fluids (1.5–2 litres a day), especially water. Following these sensible guidelines will help you to stay healthy, which will have a beneficial effect on your skin. It is worth saying that some people feel very strongly that certain foods, for example tomatoes, do make their skin feel worse. If you think this is the case and you feel you can identify which foods worsen your skin, it is worth avoiding them. It may be that you have an additional problem called urticaria (or hives), which can be triggered by some foods, and you should discuss this further with your GP. Urticaria is not related to psoriasis and has other causes as well as reactions to some foods.

When I drink a lot of alcohol my skin feels worse the next day. Why is this?

Alcohol has the effect of dehydrating the body (i.e. removing excessive amounts of water), which is one reason why a headache is part of a hangover. This dehydration also affects the skin and causes it to become drier. Consequently, if you have had excessive amounts of alcohol, you are likely to make your psoriasis drier – which will make it feel worse. Having one or two alcoholic drinks in an evening should not have an adverse effect, but drinking enough to get drunk or having more than 10 units in one evening may make your skin worse.

People sometimes find themselves drinking excessive alcohol as a way of coping with their psoriasis. This is not a helpful coping strategy and, as highlighted here, will actually make your skin worse. Some of the treatments for severe psoriasis (e.g. methotrexate – discussed in Chapter 5) make it dangerous to drink alcohol. Methotrexate is broken down in the liver, as is alcohol. Drinking alcohol while taking methotrexate can put an extra strain on the liver and may damage it.

There is some evidence that alcohol can be involved in triggering psoriasis rather than just making it worse – a suggestion that is denied by many patients. We have been told by some patients that if we had psoriasis, we would drink too! If you feel your alcohol consumption is becoming a problem, you should discuss this with your doctor.

Stress

Is psoriasis affected by rest or stress?

There is increasingly good scientific evidence to suggest that stress has an important role to play in developing psoriasis. It is helpful to consider two extreme points of view. For some people, there is a very clear relationship between stressful events and their psoriasis flaring up. This connection is so direct that they can feel the psoriasis getting worse or throbbing when they are in a difficult

situation. Other people cannot find any direct relationship between experiencing stressful events and their psoriasis flaring up. The simple answer, then, is that stress can make psoriasis worse, and for most people the role that stress plays is somewhere between the two examples given here.

It is sometimes difficult to identify the stressful event that makes psoriasis worse; it may be that a period of time passes between a stressful event and the psoriasis worsening. The other issue that is very clear is that having psoriasis itself is a stress. Thus, getting a flare-up of psoriasis may set off a vicious circle whereby the flare-up causes stress that makes the psoriasis worse, which causes stress . . . Effective and timely treatments are of particular importance as they help to break the vicious circle or even stop it from starting in the first place.

Rest is important, and finding time to unwind from a busy work or home life helps to keep stress under control. Simple things like having enough sleep help to increase your resilience and decrease the effect of a stressful lifestyle. A rest from the seemingly endless routine of applying creams to your skin can also help greatly. It may be possible for you to get support doing this from nurses in your local dermatology department or nurses at your GP practice. Alternatively, having a friend or relative who can help you is invaluable.

If psoriasis is stress related, what can be done to reduce stress levels?

This is a difficult question to answer as everyone is different in terms of what helps them to reduce stress. There are, however, a number of strategies that it is useful to consider.

First of all, you can identify the things that cause you most stress in your life and consider whether it is possible to change or avoid these. It may be useful to sit down and talk about these with someone close to you or with your own nurse/doctor. It is sometimes difficult to do this task alone because you are so close to the stress factors that it is hard to recognise them. If you cannot remove or change the things that cause you stress (e.g. it may not be possible to change your job or get rid of your kids!), you need

to use strategies that help you to relax and create time for yourself. This is where individual preference comes in. For some people, playing sport might provide a therapeutic outlet for stress. For others, having a massage, trying reflexology or starting meditation may provide the answer. The underlying message of this advice is to create space and time for yourself to allow you to do something that makes you feel good. The temptation may be to indulge in something that makes you feel good in the short term but has no real long-term benefits, for example heavy drinking. This sort of destructive activity is known as a negative coping strategy and, rather than helping the situation, will probably make it worse.

The second thing that can be done to reduce stress levels is to get effective treatment. Psoriasis and stress tend to be a vicious circle – stress can trigger psoriasis, which, when it appears, makes you feel more stressed, which makes your psoriasis worse and so on. Getting treatment that makes your skin feel and look better and that fits in with your lifestyle can break the vicious circle.

To summarise, you need a two-pronged plan to remedy the impact of stress: first, a mental approach that helps you to relax more and create time for yourself; and second, a physical approach which ensures that your psoriasis has a minimal physical impact.

