

Dandruff

Dandruff is a very common scalp condition involving excessive flaking of the skin. It leads to visible skin flakes in the hair and on clothing which can be embarrassing. Problem dandruff can be effectively managed with appropriate scalp and hair care and medicated shampoos.

What is dandruff?

Normal skin regularly sheds old skin cells. These old dead cells usually go unnoticed, as there are very few of them at any one time. Dandruff flakes are caused by an increased turnover rate of skin cells on the scalp. Dead skin cells are shed from the scalp in much larger numbers and as they are shed, these dead skin cells clump together with oil from the hair and scalp, making them visible.

Dandruff can happen to anyone at any age, but is not common in children. It tends to be seasonal and is usually most severe during winter and mildest during the summer. Dandruff is not dangerous, does not cause baldness and is not contagious.



Signs and symptoms

White, oily skin flakes or scales on the scalp, trapped in the hair and caught on clothing. Dandruff flakes can also occur on the eyebrows, in the beard and on the neck and shoulders. The scaling skin can be itchy.

Causes

The exact cause of the increased rate of skin turnover in dandruff is unknown.

However, it is thought to be linked to the overgrowth of a tiny fungus (yeast) present on the scalp. This fungus lives on most people's scalps all the time, usually without causing any problems. Sometimes, however, it seems to grow out of control and irritates the skin, causing dandruff. It is not known what causes the overgrowth of this fungus.

Things that may contribute to the development of dandruff include:

- Hormones
- Oily hair and scalp
- Infrequent shampooing, inappropriate hair conditioners or poor rinsing of the hair
- Stress
- Allergy or hypersensitivity
- Illness
- Some medical conditions (e.g., Parkinson's disease)
- A weakened immune system.

Is it dandruff?

A flaking scalp can be due to dandruff or may be a sign of a different skin disorder.

Other skin disorders that can cause a scaling and flaking scalp include:

Dry skin – can cause an itchy, dry and flaky scalp. Flakes are usually smaller and less oily than dandruff

Contact dermatitis – can cause a red, itchy, flaking scalp. It may be triggered by sensitivity to hair – care products

Seborrhoeic dermatitis – can cause red, greasy skin covered with flaky, white or yellow scales. The scalp and other skin areas rich in oil glands are usually affected – e.g., eyebrows, nose, behind ears, chest, groin. Dandruff is a mild form of seborrhoeic dermatitis

Psoriasis – causes accumulation of dead skin cells that form thick, silvery scales. Psoriasis commonly occurs on the knees, elbows and trunk, but can also affect the scalp

Tinea of the scalp – a fungal infection causing patches of scaling and hair loss

Cradle cap – the yellow scaling and crusting on the scalp of some newborn babies and infants.

Note: The treatment for these skin disorders may be different to the treatment for dandruff.

Treatment and prevention of dandruff

Dandruff can disappear suddenly without treatment or may need to be managed with specific scalp and hair care or a medicated shampoo. Sometimes dandruff takes many weeks of treatment to improve.

Shampoos

- Mild dandruff may be controlled by daily shampooing with a mild, non-medicated shampoo. This can reduce

oiliness and scale build-up on the scalp. The scalp should be massaged gently to loosen flakes and the hair and scalp rinsed thoroughly.

- Non-prescription medicated anti-dandruff shampoos and lotions are available. Some contain antifungal agents – ask a pharmacist for advice. Anti-dandruff shampoos can be harsh on skin and hair, so it is important to follow label directions carefully.
- More potent anti-dandruff shampoos and lotions, to control severe dandruff may be prescribed by a doctor.

Self care

- Shampoo your hair often (e.g., daily) if you have an oily scalp.
- Save your daily hair washing until after your exercise workout.
- Limit use of hair styling products that can make your hair and scalp more oily.
- If your scalp is dry, use a hair conditioner which will act as a moisturiser for your scalp. Try a 'leave-in' conditioner.
- Avoid using hair gels and other products that contain alcohol, which tends to dry out the scalp.
- Learn and practice relaxation techniques to manage stress.
- Eat regular, healthy meals, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and grains. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.

Important

Consult a doctor if:

- Your scalp is red, bleeding or painful
- There are patches of hair loss
- A non-prescription anti-dandruff shampoo does not help.

For more information

Dermnet NZ

Website: www.dermnetnz.org

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthinsite.gov.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on
CMI leaflets.

National Prescribing Service (NPS)

Medicines Information

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26
from anywhere in Australia.

*Pharmacists are medicines experts.
Ask a pharmacist for advice when
choosing a medicine.*

Your Self Care Pharmacy: