



Dandruff

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Introduction

Dandruff is a common, relapsing skin condition that causes flaking and itching of the skin on the scalp. It occurs most often in teenagers and young adults. Dandruff is not contagious and can be controlled effectively, but the condition tends to recur when treatment is stopped.

What is dandruff?

It is normal that the skin sheds old cells as new ones are formed. Dandruff develops when the skin renewal cycle accelerates, causing patches of dead skin cells to form on the scalp. As these cells are shed, they are seen as white, greasy flakes on the hair and shoulders. This is commonly called dandruff. The scalp may also feel dry and itchy.

Dandruff in babies

A type of dandruff known as cradle cap can occur in babies. It is most common in the first two months of life and is usually self-limiting. Gentle washing of the baby's scalp with a baby shampoo can prevent the build-up of scales. Massaging the scalp with baby oil or olive oil will help to loosen crusts, if present.

Causes

The following are causes of dandruff:

- **Seborrhoeic dermatitis:** This condition is characterised by red, greasy skin covered with flaky white or yellow scales. It occurs in areas rich in oil glands, including the scalp, which may become oily and irritated.
- **Malassezia furfur:** Malassezia is a yeast-like fungus, which lives harmlessly on the scalp of most adults.

However, in some it irritates the scalp and causes an acceleration of skin cell production.

- **Not shampooing often enough:** If hair is not washed regularly, oils and skin cells from the scalp can accumulate and cause dandruff.
- **Dry skin:** The flakes from dry skin are generally smaller and less oily than those due to other causes of dandruff. Patches of dry skin may appear on other parts of the body.
- **Sensitivity to hair care products:** Sensitivity to certain ingredients in hair care products can cause a red, itchy, scaly scalp.

Other risk factors include:

- age – dandruff tends to occur in young adults and may continue into middle age
- sex – dandruff tends to occur more commonly among men than women
- certain neurological illnesses, such as Parkinson's disease
- HIV infection or having a compromised immune system
- stress

Eczema and psoriasis are conditions that can cause the skin to become dry, red and flaky. If these conditions occur on the scalp, they can look similar to dandruff.

Management

Cases of mild dandruff may respond to more frequent use of a gentle shampoo. Should this not prove helpful, a dandruff treatment shampoo available over the counter may well be effective. These shampoos typically contain one of the following active ingredients:

- **Ketoconazole** is an antifungal agent that has been shown to be effective in the treatment of dandruff. This agent is available as a 2% shampoo, which should be used twice a week for two to four weeks, and then weekly or fortnightly as necessary.
- **Selenium sulfide** reduces the cell turnover rate and is also effective as an antifungal agent. This 2.5% shampoo should be used twice a week for the first two weeks, then weekly for the following two weeks, and as often as

necessary after that. The hair should be thoroughly rinsed after shampooing to avoid discolouration, especially of blonde, grey or dyed hair. This agent should not be used within 48 hours of colouring or perming the hair, nor should it be applied to broken or inflamed skin.

- **Zinc pyrithione** kills the *Malassezia* fungus and slows down cell turnover rate. It should be used twice a week for the first two weeks, and then weekly as required.
- **Salicylic acid** in shampoos helps to soften the skin and eliminate scales. These shampoos may leave the scalp dry, which could lead to more flaking. Using a hair conditioner may help to relieve dryness.
- **Coal tar** shampoos help to slow down skin cell production. However, the smell of coal tar is unacceptable to some and the ingredient may also cause skin sensitisation and photosensitivity. Shampoos that contain coal tar have been shown to have limited effectiveness.

“The treatment may not cure dandruff permanently. Treatment should be continued on an intermittent basis to prevent recurrence”

Remember:

- When using anti-dandruff treatments, always follow the instructions provided by the manufacturer.
- It is the scalp that needs to be treated rather than the hair. Treatments should be applied to the scalp, massaged in gently and left on the scalp for at least five minutes for full effect.
- The treatment may not cure dandruff permanently. Treatment should be continued on an intermittent basis to prevent recurrence.

Self-help measures

- Learn to manage stress
- Shampoo often, at least three times a week
- Spend some time in the sun

Call the doctor if:

- over-the-counter dandruff shampoos have been used appropriately for at least a month and the condition has not improved
- the scalp becomes red or swollen
- psoriasis is suspected or if there are signs of infection
- the dandruff becomes severe or the scalp becomes particularly itchy

Conclusion

Dandruff is a common condition but can be managed effectively with over-the-counter preparations and by observing self-help measures. If symptoms do not improve after appropriate treatment, a doctor should be consulted.

Bibliography

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