

# MANAGING YOUR DERMATITIS HERPETIFORMIS

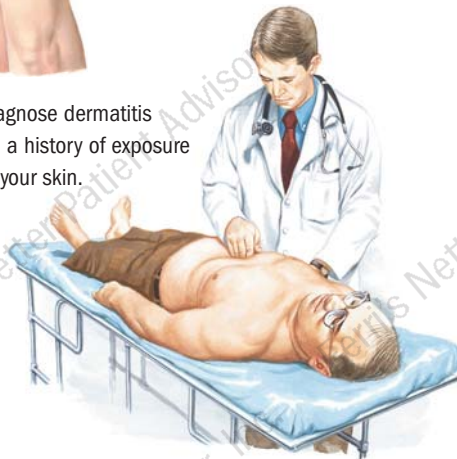


Dermatitis herpetiformis is an uncommon, hereditary, and chronic skin disorder. It usually affects adults between 20 and 60, males slightly more often than females.

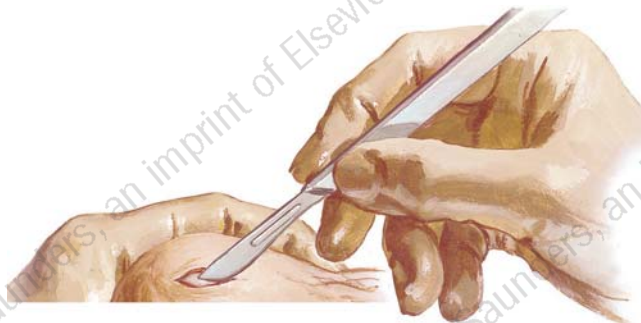


Clumps of itchy, small blisters and red bumps appear on the skin, usually on the scalp, face, elbows, forearms, knees, shoulder blades, lower back, and buttocks.

Your doctor will diagnose dermatitis herpetiformis from a history of exposure and by examining your skin.



Your doctor may also do a skin biopsy, or remove a small piece of skin, for study to help make the diagnosis.



## What Is Dermatitis Herpetiformis?

Dermatitis herpetiformis is a chronic, recurrent skin disorder manifesting with clumps of small blisters (vesicles) and red bumps (papules). Outbreaks may last for days, weeks, months, or even years.

Dermatitis herpetiformis is uncommon. It usually affects adults between 20 and 60, but children may also have it. It occurs in males slightly more often.

Other family members may have a history of this condition. This disorder is not contagious and cannot be prevented.

## What Causes Dermatitis Herpetiformis?

The cause is unknown, but the disorder is probably autoimmune (i.e., a condition in which the body's own immune system attacks itself, causing injury or disease).

Some people also have celiac disease (disorders in which people cannot digest gluten, a protein in grains such as wheat).

## What Are the Symptoms of Dermatitis Herpetiformis?

Lesions are very itchy and may cause burning or stinging. The clumps of blisters are symmetric (i.e., similar on both halves of the body). Lesions usually involve the scalp, face, elbows, forearms, knees, shoulder blades, lower back, and buttocks.

Scratching may cause abrasions, crusting, and infections.

## How Is Dermatitis Herpetiformis Diagnosed?

The doctor makes a diagnosis usually from the look of the skin. The doctor may also do a skin biopsy (i.e., removing a small piece of skin for study) or blood tests.

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Treatment includes using medicines (e.g., steroids, calamine lotion) and cool-water soaks to improve symptoms, and avoiding triggers of the disorder, such as foods containing gluten.



Tell your doctor about all medicines that you take, including over-the-counter drugs, and talk to your doctor about concerns about your condition and drug side effects.



Avoid activities that can cause overheating or sweating or make the affected area too moist, because this can trigger or worsen your condition.

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### How Is Dermatitis Herpetiformis Treated?

Treatment depends on its location and how severe it is, its impact on quality of life, and response to therapy. The condition can be controlled but cannot be cured. Treatment includes avoiding triggers, general measures, and medicines. General measures involve soaking the area in cool water to soothe irritation and reduce itching and avoiding gluten in the diet.

Medicines (such as steroids, calamine lotion, antihistamines, and dapsone or sulfapyridine) can reduce inflammation (swelling, redness), improve symptoms, and reduce the severity and duration of the outbreak.

### DOs and DON'Ts in Managing Dermatitis Herpetiformis:

- ✓ **DO** take medicines prescribed by your doctor.
- ✓ **DO** tell your doctor about all medicines, including over-the-counter drugs, that you take.
- ✓ **DO** read medicine labels and follow instructions.
- ✓ **DO** avoid gluten in your diet, which may improve the condition.
- ✓ **DO** avoid activities that cause overheating and too much sweating. Shower and clean skin lesions immediately if you sweat too much.
- ✓ **DO** use good skin hygiene to reduce risks of bacterial infection.
- ✓ **DO** keep follow-up doctor appointments.
- ✓ **DO** watch your skin for healing and signs of infection, including redness around skin lesions, pus, increased pain or swelling of the lesions or lymph nodes, and fever.
- ✓ **DO** wash clothing, towels, and linens often if skin lesions ooze, crust, or may be infected.
- ✓ **DO** call your doctor if lesions become worse or new lesions appear despite therapy.
- ⊘ **DON'T** stop taking your medicine or change the dose without asking your doctor.
- ⊘ **DON'T** do activities that can cause overheating or sweating.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

#### Contact the following source:

- American Academy of Dermatology  
Tel: (866) 503-SKIN (503-7546)  
Website: <http://www.aad.org>