

MANAGING YOUR ERYTHEMA MULTIFORME



Erythema multiforme is a skin condition that in the mild form usually affects children and young adults. Causes, found in only half the cases, include infections, allergic reactions to drugs (penicillin, vaccines), hormone changes (pregnancy), and other illnesses (such as cancer).

What Is Erythema Multiforme?

Erythema multiforme is a reddening, swelling, and sometimes blistering of the skin. A milder form, called erythema multiforme minor, usually doesn't cause complications and clears up on its own. The mild form usually affects children and young adults, lasts from 2 to 4 weeks, and can recur during the first few years. The more severe form, called Stevens-Johnson syndrome or erythema multiforme major, can cause serious symptoms that need prompt treatment and maybe hospitalization.

What Causes Erythema Multiforme?

The cause is unknown in half the cases. Most of these skin irritations result from infections, allergic reactions to drugs such as penicillin or vaccines, physical conditions such as pregnancy and other hormone changes, and illnesses such as cancer.



The skin shows redness, swelling, and sometimes blistering. The milder form usually doesn't cause complications and clears up on its own in 2 to 4 weeks.



What Are the Symptoms of Erythema Multiforme?

Skin in the minor form has round red bumps and blisters on the face, lips, arms, and legs on both sides of the body. These bumps can look like red or pink targets; they can become large blisters. Fever and muscle and joint aches may be present.

In the serious form, people have high fever, large blisters, severe itching, and ulcers on membranes of the mouth, nose, eyes, genital area, arms, and skin. Without complications, symptoms go away in 4 weeks, but mouth sores can last for months. Untreated eye involvement can lead to blindness.

Erythema multiforme major, also called Stevens-Johnson syndrome, is the more serious form that needs prompt medical care. Large blisters and ulcers form in the mouth and on the nose, eyes, genital area, arms, and skin.



How Is Erythema Multiforme Diagnosed?

The doctor will examine the rash and take a medical history to make a diagnosis.

Blood tests may be done to check for an infection. A skin biopsy may also be done to rule out another medical condition. In a biopsy, a small sample of skin with the rash will be removed and studied with a microscope.



In addition to a physical examination, your doctor may want blood tests and a sample of the rash for diagnosis.



Most rashes will clear up in a few weeks. Your doctor may prescribe pills and steroid cream to reduce itching and swelling.



Your doctor may refer you to an eye specialist if the rash is in the eye area. If the rash near the eye goes untreated, it can cause blindness.



You'll want to find out the cause to avoid it in the future, if you can. Talk with your doctor to change medicine or hormones to avoid more episodes.



Don't apply skin creams or ointments to broken or bleeding skin. Take acetaminophen for pain unless your doctor says not to.

How Is Erythema Multiforme Treated?

Treatment focuses on controlling the cause and symptoms. For a drug reaction, the drug needs to be stopped. If a bacterial infection is the cause, antibiotics are given. Symptoms are relieved by using moist compresses (for itching), soothing lukewarm or cool baths, drugs such as steroid (prednisone) creams (for itching and swelling), mouthwashes and rinses (for mouth blisters), and eyewash and other topical medicine (for a rash near the eyes). Eye involvement may mean a visit to an eye specialist.

The severe disorder can cause major skin damage. In that case, hospitalization in a burn unit may be needed.

DOs and DON'Ts in Managing Erythema Multiforme:

- ✓ **DO** promptly treat any illness or condition that may lead to erythema multiforme. Avoid suspected causes as much as possible, such as drugs you are allergic to.
- ✓ **DO** eat a soft or liquid diet if you have mouth sores.
- ✓ **DO** apply cool wet Burow's solution compresses or just a cool wet cloth to blisters.
- ✓ **DO** call your doctor immediately if you have vision changes, eye pain, vomiting, or diarrhea.
- ✓ **DO** take acetaminophen for pain unless otherwise directed by your doctor.
- ✓ **DO** call your doctor if new symptoms occur during treatment, or if symptoms get much worse.
- ⊘ **DON'T** apply skin creams or ointments to broken or bleeding skin.
- ⊘ **DON'T** take hot baths or hot showers (they may worsen skin irritation).

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact the following source:

- American Academy of Dermatology
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Website: <http://www.aad.org>