

# Dandruff

Dandruff is flaking of the scalp (the skin on the top of the head). It is very common. Skin flakes can be seen in the hair and on clothing. Problem dandruff can be well managed with the right scalp and hair care, and medicated shampoos.

## What is dandruff?

Normal skin regularly sheds (loses) old, dead skin cells. Dandruff occurs when the scalp sheds more dead skin cells than normal. These dead skin cells clump together with oil from the hair and scalp, and get caught in hair. They can also fall onto the shoulders.

Dandruff can happen to anyone at any age. It is common in children but more likely to occur in puberty, boys and men. It is often worst during winter and mildest during summer. Dandruff is not dangerous, does not cause baldness and cannot be spread from person to person.

## Signs and symptoms

- Small, white, oily skin flakes or scales on the scalp, in the hair or on clothing.
- Dandruff flakes on the eyebrows, in the beard and on the neck and shoulders.
- An itchy scalp.



## Causes

It is not clear what causes the change in skin shedding that occurs with dandruff. It may be linked to a tiny fungus (yeast) on the scalp. This fungus lives on most people's scalps all the time, usually without causing any problems. Sometimes, this fungus irritates the skin causing more dead skin cells than normal. These mix with skin oils to make dandruff flakes.

Things that may play a role in worsening dandruff include:

- stress or tiredness
- seasonal factors (usually winter)
- allergy or hypersensitivity
- hormones
- oily skin
- 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 condition.

Other skin conditions 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 areas of skin with a lot of oil glands are usually affected (e.g. eyebrows, nose, behind ears, chest, groin). Dandruff is a mild, mostly symptom free form of seborrhoeic dermatitis.

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

**Tinea of the scalp** – fungal infection that causes 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 conditions may be different to the treatment for dandruff.

## Treatment of dandruff

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

## Shampoos

- Mild dandruff may be controlled by daily shampooing with a mild, non-medicated shampoo. This can reduce oil and scale build-up on the scalp. The scalp should be massaged gently to loosen flakes, and the hair and scalp rinsed well.
- Non-prescription medicated anti-dandruff shampoos and lotions are available. Some contain antifungal medicines. Anti-dandruff shampoos can be harsh on skin and hair, so it is important to follow label directions carefully. Ask a pharmacist for advice.
- Stronger 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 a scaly scalp.
- Brush your hair regularly.
- Save your daily hair wash until after your exercise.
- Limit use of hair styling products that can make your hair and scalp more oily.
- Washing your hair daily can make your scalp too dry. Using a hair conditioner can act as a moisturiser. Try a matching antidandruff shampoo and conditioner, or a 'leave-in' conditioner.
- Avoid using hair gels and other products that contain alcohol, which can dry out the scalp.
- Avoid using hair dryers and hair straighteners which can dry the scalp.

- Learn and use relaxation techniques to manage stress.
- Have a healthy diet. Eat a variety of vegetables, fruits, wholegrain/ wholemeal foods, protein-rich foods (e.g. nuts, lean meats, fish, eggs, beans) and low-fat dairy foods every day. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.

## Important

Get medical advice if:

- your scalp is red, bleeding or painful
- there are patches of hair loss
- thick, flaky patches are coming from the scalp
- you have a rash on your body at the same time
- a non-prescription anti-dandruff shampoo does not help after 2–3 weeks of use, or makes your dandruff worse.

## For more information

### **The Australian Parenting Website**

Website: [www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)

### **DermNet New Zealand**

All about the skin

Website: [www.dermnetnz.org](http://www.dermnetnz.org)

### **Australasian College of Dermatologists**

Website: [www.dermcoll.edu.au](http://www.dermcoll.edu.au)

### **Healthdirect Australia**

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: [www.healthdirect.gov.au](http://www.healthdirect.gov.au)

### **NPS MedicineWise Medicine Line**

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

### **Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)**

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

### **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.***

## Related Fact Cards

» *Eczema and dermatitis*

» *Hair loss*

» *Psoriasis*

» *Tinea*

## Your Self Care Pharmacy:

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V3.0

PSA0236