Is Psoriasis Contagious or Caused by Something Else?

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Is Psoriasis Contagious? Putting People's Fears to Rest

We already know what psoriasis looks like and where it can be found on the body. The question then is – is psoriasis a contagious skin condition, or a recurrent skin condition?

Well, the dictionary definition of contagious is “spread from one person or organism to another by direct or indirect contact.” All sources point to the fact that direct or indirect contact does not spread psoriasis – therefore, it is not a contagious skin condition.

It is, in fact, an autoimmune condition. An autoimmune condition means that the body’s immune system goes into overdrive at incorrect times – the body begins to attack its own tissues or organs.

In the instance of psoriasis, the immune system causes the body to begin to grow skin cells at a faster rate than normal. This reaction causes the skin cells to pile up, causing the patches that we are oh-so-familiar with.

Before there was a proper understanding of what psoriasis was, it was often confused with leprosy – hence the confusion with why people *still* think it is contagious!

Who Gets Psoriasis?

The causes of psoriasis are unknown, but genetics and the immune system play a part.

Genetics don’t tell us everything, though; just because there is a family history doesn’t mean that everyone in the family is doomed to have psoriasis. As with any autoimmune disease, there has to be a trigger that irritates the gene. This irritation turns “on” the gene and psoriasis develops; it can be as simple as a sunburn or having strep throat.

According to the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS), men and women are equally affected by psoriasis. Family history and genetics play a role.

Psoriasis often develops between the ages of 15 and 35, but anyone can get it any age, including children. And children have a higher risk of developing psoriasis if one or both parents have it, this according to the Psoriasis and Psoriatic Arthritis Alliance.

Other risk factors include viral and bacterial infections, stress, smoking and being overweight.

What Causes Psoriasis?

Scientists have no explanation at this time why your immune system malfunctions and triggers psoriasis. Some environmental factors may be to blame for your psoriasis include:

- **Stress**: Having stress itself can cause psoriasis – and when life is more stressful, psoriasis is often worse.
- **Cold weather and dry weather**: This type of weather is drying to the skin – which sets the stage for a psoriasis flare-up. Hot, sunny weather seems to improve symptoms.
- **Infections**: Certain symptoms are known to worsen psoriasis. For example, strep throat and tonsillitis cause guttate, which is small, salmon-pink droplets on the skin, several weeks after the infection. Also, people who have HIV and psoriasis typically have worse psoriasis symptoms.
- **Skin injuries**: Any trauma to the skin, such as a bump, bruise, cut, scrape, tattoo, or vaccination, can result in a flare-up of psoriasis symptoms. This is typically limited to the site of injury. This phenomenon is known as the "Koebner phenomenon."
- **Sunburn**: Although the heat may mitigate psoriasis symptoms, too much of a good thing can worsen symptoms.
- **Alcohol consumption: A**lcohol is known to worsen psoriasis symptoms, especially in men.
- **Medications**: While medication typically helps psoriasis, some medications are known to trigger flares of psoriasis. For example, certain blood pressure medications, called beta blockers, are thought to flare symptoms, although your doctor may weigh the pros and cons and decide the heart medication is more important. Other meds that may worsen symptoms include NSAIDs, specific mental health medications, antimalarial medications, and a few different antibiotics.
- **Smoking**: Smoking is also thought to worsen symptoms.

But once you have psoriasis, it is a lifetime condition and the best way to manage it is with medication and other treatments.

Misconceptions

Psoriasis is a skin condition that goes back centuries, and there was a time when it was lumped with other contagious conditions, including leprosy. There is definitely still much confusion about psoriasis because it is not a very well understood condition.

Misconceptions and lack of understanding and awareness exist. You don't get psoriasis by brushing up against someone with skin lesions, and you don't get it through kissing, being intimate, or swimming in the same water, or even sharing a towel.

People develop psoriasis because of genetics, not became of bad eating habits, or their lifestyle and not because of bad hygiene. You cannot get it from anyone else, and you cannot give to anyone.

Stigma Around Psoriasis

Living with psoriasis, you probably get impolite and blunt questions from people who just don't understand and know about the condition. And even though you do your best to answer and dispel misinformation, the experience can sometimes feel humiliating and isolating.

A study published in the September 2015 *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology* aimed to find how people without skin conditions react when shown photos of skin affected by psoriasis and other skin diseases. The results were showed psoriasis carried about the same stigma as herpes.

People may view psoriasis similarly to herpes because there is a misguided belief it is contagious, and those mistaken beliefs do much harm. A 2012 Polish study of people with psoriasis found most people with psoriasis feel the stigma, and are most affected when others stare at their skin lesions.

Those surveyed felt rejection, shame and guilt and these feelings contributed to exacerbated symptoms, depression and reduced quality of life. The researchers of the psoriasis study emphasized the need for greater awareness of psoriasis and most notably a better understanding that it is not contagious.

Psoriasis by the Numbers

We've established that psoriasis is an autoimmune disease – meaning that we can't *help* having it. We've also established that despite this fact, it is still highly misunderstood and stigmatized.

So, let's talk numbers so that we can all *truly* understand that psoriasis is common – and while it is uncomfortable for the person suffering with it, it is not a big deal for anyone else.

Facts about psoriasis:

- Psoriasis is the most common autoimmune disease in the US.
- 125 million people worldwide have psoriasis, which is about 2% to 3% of our population.
- About 60% of people with psoriasis state that their condition is a large problem in their everyday life.
- The costs of psoriasis – direct and indirect – are approximately $11.25 billion.

The Takeaway

Living with psoriasis, you know the stigma and misconceptions make life difficult. You probably wear long clothing to hide lesions and get uncomfortable when people stare at your skin and/or avoid touching you.

The best you can do to help yourself and others is to work towards ending the misunderstandings out there. Talk openly with friends, family and others about psoriasis and make sure they understand it is an autoimmune disease and autoimmune conditions are not contagious.

And if you hear someone question the autoimmune nature of psoriasis, don't get upset; instead, take a minute to educate them. Promoting education and awareness is important for you and others struggling to maintain a good quality of life despite psoriasis.