

About Lichen Sclerosis

Parkland Health & Hospital System Vulvology Clinic



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What is lichen sclerosis?

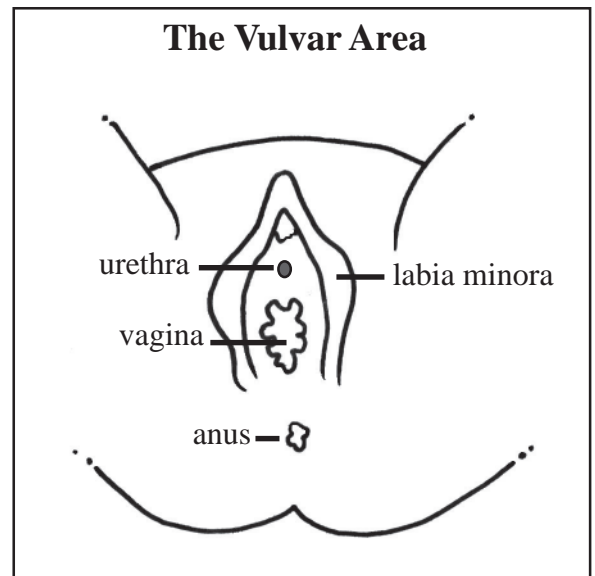
Lichen sclerosis is a skin problem that can happen on any part of the body including the vulva and the anal (rectal) area. Lichen sclerosis is not an infection nor a fungus. There are 4 ways that lichen sclerosis can change your skin:

Your skin may:

- have thin, white areas (this is the most common).
- have thickened white areas.
- be irritated (red and swollen).
- have tears or cracks.

You may have all 4 at the same time.

Lichen sclerosis happens more often in women who have gone through menopause (the change). It can happen at any age, even in children.



What causes lichen sclerosis?

The exact cause of lichen sclerosis is not known. It may be an **autoimmune** illness. An autoimmune illness is one where your body's antibodies (which it makes to fight off infection), attack your own skin, and cause damage.

Because it is an autoimmune illness, lichen sclerosis is **not** passed from one person to another. This means it is **not** passed to a baby during birth, nor by touching or having sex with someone who has lichen sclerosis.

Other family members may also have lichen sclerosis.

How will I know if I have lichen sclerosis?

- Itching that may be mild, or very bad.
- Sores or tears in your skin caused by scratching.
- Bruised skin with small broken blood vessels.
- Flat or no inner lips of the vulva (labia minora).
- Narrowing of the opening of the vagina, which may cause pain during sex.

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These symptoms will be different in each woman. They may get better or worse at different times. For example, they may be worse in the summer when you sweat more and the moisture irritates your skin.

How will my doctor or healthcare provider check for lichen sclerosis?

Your doctor or healthcare provider will look for vulvar skin changes that may be found with lichen sclerosis. Sometimes, a biopsy or small sample of skin may be sent for testing. Lichen sclerosis does not cause skin cancer. But there have been cases of skin cancer growing in the same places as lichen sclerosis.

How should lichen sclerosis be treated?

Lichen sclerosis often lasts a long time, but it can be controlled with treatment. Mild scarring of the skin often happens, but treatment can usually keep you from having bad scarring which can narrow the opening of the vagina.

You may be treated in any of the following ways.

1. **Vulvar skin care.** Keep the vulvar/vaginal area as clean and dry as possible.
2. **Steroid ointment.** Put a thin layer of steroid ointment over the vulvar area. This will lessen redness, swelling, itching and burning. Use only as your doctor or healthcare provider tell you to. Using too much or too often can thin the skin and make the problem worse.