



## **LICHEN SCLEROSUS**

### **What is it?**

Lichen sclerosus is a skin disease that affects the genital region in children and adults of both sexes. Sometimes lichen sclerosus may involve the skin around the anus in girls and women. Lichen sclerosus is more common in women than men. Occasionally lichen sclerosus occurs on other parts of the body.

### **What causes it?**

The cause of lichen sclerosus remains unknown despite much research. Lichen sclerosus is most likely an autoimmune disease where your immune system attacks your skin, for no known reason. Importantly lichen sclerosus is not due to stress, poor diet and is not an infectious disease. Lichen sclerosus is not a sexually acquired infection (STD) so cannot be passed onto your partner by sexual contact.

### **What does it look like?**

Lichen sclerosus produces whitening and thickening of the vulva in women (sparing the vagina) and the penis and foreskin in men. Occasionally genital skin is thinned resulting in cuts, tears, bleeding or bruising. Itchiness of the vulva or penis and foreskin is common. Males may notice tightening of the foreskin (prepuce) making it more difficult to retract the foreskin (phimosis), resulting in pain with erections and sexual activity.

### **How is it diagnosed?**

It takes skill to make the correct diagnosis of lichen sclerosus. Sometimes the correct diagnosis is only made after many months or years. Many doctors may have been seen before the correct diagnosis is made. Vulval itch or discomfort is commonly mistaken for vaginal "candidiasis" or "thrush". A small specimen of skin (skin biopsy) is often taken to help confirm the diagnosis of lichen sclerosus.

### **Why is it important to treat genital lichen sclerosus?**

Lichen sclerosus may be simply a cosmetic problem causing whitening of the vulva in women or whitening of the penis and foreskin in boys and men. Lichen sclerosus is usually itchy. Thinning of the skin of the vulva or penis may cause bruising.

Lichen sclerosus may cause scarring of the genitalia. Women may notice narrowing of their vaginal opening resulting in pain with intercourse. There is a very small risk (about 5% chance) of a woman developing cancer of the vulva after many years if vulval lichen sclerosus is untreated. Early treatment of lichen sclerosus may prevent scarring of the vulva and probably eliminates the risk of developing cancer of the vulva later.

## How is it treated?

Lichen sclerosus is managed by firstly trying to reduce irritants to the skin by replacing soap with a non-soap wash and using a body moisturiser daily after washing. A more oily moisturiser may be used as a lubricant for sexual activity. I recommend Olive and Bee cream.

A corticosteroid ointment is prescribed to apply directly to the area of genital lichen sclerosus for 6 to 12 weeks, after which time the strength and frequency of the corticosteroid ointment may be reduced. Corticosteroid creams or ointments are quite safe to use on the genital or anal skin under supervision.

Very rarely surgery may be needed to correct persistent narrowing of the vaginal opening or urethra (where urine comes out).

Further specialist treatment is needed if cancer of the vulva develops. Even though the risk is small, both women and men with genital lichen sclerosus need long-term follow-up to detect scarring of the genitals or development of cancer.

Most experts caring for women and men with genital lichen sclerosus believe that early treatment removes, or greatly minimises, the risk of developing genital cancer. Sadly, many men and women do not know they have genital lichen sclerosus, delaying early treatment. Even after successful treatment of your lichen sclerosus, a regular annual check-up with your doctor is needed.

## Other immediate management

- Avoid soap, perfumed products, bleaches and other irritants or allergens
- Ensure skin hygiene is maintained with cool water and a soft cloth but avoid over-cleaning
- Wear loose cotton clothing and avoid overheating
- Burow's solution (13% aluminium acetate) diluted 1:20-1:40 with cold water applied as a cold compress BD may be helpful for burning itchy skin
- Use daily sorbolene for moisturising skin
- Using vinegar sitz baths. Put 1 cup of white vinegar into the bathtub. Add enough water to cover your hips. Soak for 10 to 15 minutes. You can do this two to four times a day for up to a week.