

Itching may seem like nothing more than nature's way of driving you mad, but it was actually designed to help your body detect such threats as insects and microbes. Sure, scratching an itch is kind of orgasmic. Just know when to pull in your claws.

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EXPERT**



4 Routes to Relief

ANTI-HISTAMINES

Use a non-sedating one for daytime relief of histamine-triggered itches. (Seasonal allergies and mosquito bites are two culprits.) Antihistamines that can cause drowsiness are good for overnight itching—you'll scratch less if you're slightly sedated, says Martin Steinhoff, M.D., Ph.D., a professor of dermatology at UC San Francisco.



OATMEAL BATHS

Oatmeal is packed with anti-inflammatory chemicals that soothe itchy skin. But don't pour your breakfast into the bath: Sprinkle about a tablespoon of 100 percent colloidal oatmeal under the tap, and soak for 15 to 20 minutes, recommend researchers in Iran.



MOISTURIZERS

Desert-dry skin, a common cause of itching, needs moisture—but water evaporates, which can have a drying effect. "Lotions are more than 70 percent water; creams are around 50 percent," says Dr. Steinhoff. An ointment like Aquaphor has less water than creams do. If you're desperate, "put on wet pajamas after bathing and moisturizing," he says. "Then put dry pajamas on top. This can boost moisturizer absorption tenfold." (And lower your attractiveness twentyfold.)



TOPICAL CORTICOSTEROIDS

These stop itching from inflammatory causes, like eczema, allergic reactions, poison ivy, or rashes. "Use hydrocortisone only briefly and for very mild itches," says Dr. Steinhoff. For severe itching, see an M.D. for a stronger steroid. "Hydrocortisone is often too weak," he says. Just avoid using any steroid for too long. "This can lead to thinning of the skin," Dr. Steinhoff warns.



What Exactly Is Itching?

This sensation, called pruritus by dermatologists, has some neurological similarities to pain. It's your skin's way of alerting you to a threat, Dr. Steinhoff says. Itching can start with a direct stimulus—either real (a leaf brushes your skin) or imagined (you see someone scratching). It can also be triggered by an internal stimulus, such as a histamine release during an allergic reaction. Both types of triggers activate C-fiber nerves, located just below the skin's surface. They send signals up your spine and into your brain, where regions associated with sensation, emotion, and memory light up, says Gil Yosipovitch, M.D., a professor of dermatology at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center.



Itchy Balls, Solved

DO YOU SCRATCH LIKE A MAJOR LEAGUER? TRACING THE CAUSE OF ITCHY BALLS CAN BE TOUGH: IT MAY BE AN ALLERGIC REACTION, A HYGIENE ISSUE, AN INFECTION, OR EVEN A PINCHED NERVE, SAYS DR. STEINHOFF. SO START WITH A NONSEDATING ANTIHISTAMINE AND SMEAR ON SOOTHING VANICREAM ONCE A DAY. FOR INFLAMMATION, APPLY A THIN LAYER OF HYDROCORTISONE DAILY (UNLESS YOU SUSPECT INFECTION). NO RELIEF WITHIN A WEEK? SEE A DERMATOLOGIST.

ANDREA MANZATI (illustrations), MATT RAINEY (products)

Pharmacists' Top OTC Picks

NONSEDATING ANTIHISTAMINE



CLARITIN

SEDATING ANTIHISTAMINE



ZYRTEC

INSECT BITE LOTION/CREAM



CORTIZONE-10

MOISTURIZING CREAM



EUCERIN

Source: American Pharmacists Association 2012 survey



Why Scratching Equals Ecstasy

Scratching is sort of like a mini-orgasm. "It may activate your reward system," says Zhou-Feng Chen, Ph.D., director of the Center for the Study of Itch at Washington University in St. Louis. Pain may also play a role: If scratching hurts your skin, the pain can help quell the itch because the two sensations are competing. The downside: Too much clawing can cause injury or infection. If that's you, firmly rub the area with a chilled cotton T-shirt instead.