

# Seborrhea: What it is and how to treat it

## What is seborrhea?

Seborrheic dermatitis is a disease that causes flaking of the skin. It usually affects the scalp. In adolescents and adults, it is commonly called "dandruff." In babies, it is known as "cradle cap."

Seborrhea can also affect the skin on other parts of the body, such as the face, ears and chest, and the creases of the arms, legs and groin. Controlling seborrhea on the scalp may help reduce symptoms in other parts of the body. Seborrhea usually causes the skin to look a little greasy, and scaly or flaky.

## What causes seborrhea?

The exact cause isn't known. The cause may be different in infants and adults. Seborrhea may be related to hormones, because the disorder often appears in infancy and disappears before puberty. Or the cause might be a fungus, called *Pityrosporum ovale*. This organism is normally present in the skin in small numbers, but sometimes its numbers increase, resulting in the skin disease.

Seborrhea most often occurs in babies younger than 3 months of age and in adults from 30 to 60 years of age. It's more common in men than in women. Seborrhea has also been linked to neurologic disorders such as Parkinson's disease and epilepsy. The reason for this relationship isn't known.

## How is seborrhea treated?

The treatment of seborrhea depends on its location on the body and on the person's age.

### Seborrhea of the scalp (dandruff) in adults and adolescents.

Dandruff is usually treated with shampoos that contain one of three active ingredients:

- selenium sulfide** (Selsun Blue)
- zinc pyrithione** (Head & Shoulders)
- coal tar extract** (Neutrogena T/Gel, Denorex)

Start by using one of these shampoos daily until your dandruff is controlled, and then use it 2 or 3 times a week. Alternating from one brand to another (i.e. first selenium sulfide, then zinc pyrithione, then coal tar extract, and back again) every couple of weeks may be even more effective.

When you use a dandruff shampoo, rub the shampoo into your hair thoroughly and let it stay on your hair and scalp for at least 5 minutes before rinsing. This will give it time to work.

Sometimes the scale can be so thick that it must be removed before using medicated shampoo. Try applying warm mineral oil or olive oil to the scalp and washing several hours later with a dishwashing liquid or a tar shampoo.

For resistant cases, **Nizoral shampoo** 1% is now available without a prescription. If the shampoo alone doesn't help, your doctor might want you to use a prescription medications like prescription strength Nizoral, sulfur products or steroid lotions in addition.

### Seborrhea of the folds of the skin in adolescents and adults.

Mild steroid lotions may be used in adolescents and adults.

### Seborrhea of the scalp (cradle cap) in babies.

Seborrhea of the scalp in babies is treated with products that are not as strong as those used in adults. You might start with a mild, non-medicated baby shampoo. Brushing your baby's scalp with a soft brush, like a toothbrush, can help loosen scales or flakes. But be gentle when massaging or brushing your baby's scalp--a break in the skin makes it vulnerable to infection. If that doesn't work, talk to your doctor about switching to a shampoo that contains tar.