



Keratosis Pilaris

What are the aims of this leaflet?

This leaflet has been written to help you understand more about keratosis pilaris. It tells you what it is, what causes it, what can be done about it, and where you can find out more about it.

What is keratosis pilaris?

Keratosis pilaris is a very common and completely harmless skin condition. In the population as a whole, keratosis pilaris may affect as many as one person in three. Its name gives some idea of what it is. 'Keratosis' means that there is too much keratin – which makes up the tough horny outer layer of the skin: 'pilaris' comes from the Latin for hair (pilus). In keratosis pilaris, many small (1 to 2 mm. across) horny plugs can be seen blocking the hair follicles on the upper and outer parts of the arms and thighs.

What causes keratosis pilaris?

Keratosis pilaris is an inherited skin condition, running strongly in many families, sometimes with a generally dry skin (ichthyosis). The way it is inherited varies from family to family, but often fits into an 'autosomal dominant' pattern – which means that there will be a 1 in 2 chance that each child of an affected parent will inherit the condition. Keratosis pilaris appears when extra keratin accumulates in the hair follicles. This is usually in childhood, and most obvious during adolescence, often it clears in adulthood. It tends to be better in the summer than in the winter. Keratosis pilaris is harmless, and is not infectious.

Is keratosis pilaris hereditary?

Yes, see above.

What are the symptoms of keratosis pilaris?

Some people find their keratosis pilaris ugly. The skin feels rough or spiky as though it has permanent goose bumps. Occasionally keratosis pilaris is itchy.

What does keratosis pilaris look like?

The groups of small horny bumps are most common on the backs of the upper arms and on the fronts of the thighs. Sometimes keratosis pilaris also affects the back and chest and, in less common forms, the face and eyebrows as well.

Some redness may appear around the small spiky bumps. If a plug is pulled off, a fine coiled-up hair may be found inside it.

How will keratosis pilaris be diagnosed?

There are no specific tests for keratosis pilaris, however your doctor will recognise it easily and a biopsy is seldom needed.

Can keratosis pilaris be cured?

No, but often it does clear up during adult life.

How can keratosis pilaris be treated?

No treatment clears keratosis pilaris satisfactorily, and ordinary emollients (moisturisers) are of limited benefit. Creams containing salicylic acid, lactic acid and/or urea are sometimes felt to be more effective. Several simple types can be bought or obtained on prescription, and there is no advantage to be gained from using expensive cosmetic or vitamin creams. In many cases it may be best to wait for the problem to improve on its own.

What can I do?

General measures to reduce skin dryness may help:

Use mild soaps.

Apply moisturisers frequently.

Have tepid showers rather than hot baths.

The use of an abrasive pad may sometimes be of help.

Where can I get more information about keratosis pilaris?

Web links to detailed leaflets:

www.emedicine.com/derm/topic211.htm

(While every effort has been made to ensure that the information given in this leaflet is accurate, not every treatment will be suitable or effective for every person. Your own doctor will be able to advise in greater detail)

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