



EUROPEAN ACADEMY OF
DERMATOLOGY AND VENEREOLOGY

Information Leaflet for Patients

SKIN PICKING SYNDROMES

The aim of this leaflet

This leaflet is designed to help you understand more about skin picking syndromes. It tells you what this condition is, what causes it, and what can be done for treatment.

SKIN PICKING SYNDROMES

How common is skin picking?

Are you sometimes picking your skin? Or pulling your hair? Are you sometimes harming your skin?

Don't be ashamed, skin picking and related syndromes are not rare; about 1% of the general population have the same problem and there is help to be found. In childhood it is much easier to handle. It is important to not hesitate to ask for help. The prognosis is good most of the time.

What is skin picking and how does it occur?

Skin picking syndromes are habits that damage your skin. It is an exaggeration of grooming behaviour, which is normal in animals and humans. There is some genetic background.

There are two possibilities that lead to this behaviour:

1. You have a fixed idea to pick your skin. You have tried to stop the behaviour many times but you cannot really control it. You cannot remove it from your mind - it forces you to act again and again. Shortly after having done the behaviour you feel relieved and briefly better, but emotions like guilt or shame arise. And you are angry at yourself! In medicine it is called obsessive-compulsive behaviour.
2. You do it without thinking about it beforehand. It comes when something is going wrong in your life. Afterwards you feel relieved, but not so much shame or guilt. In medicine this is called impulsive behaviour.



What are the different kinds of skin picking?

1. Skin picking leads to sore skin, wounds, and scars.
2. Hair pulling (*trichotillomania*): pulling, rubbing, or breaking.
3. Nail biting (*onychophagia*): there is damage of the skin near the nails, the cuticles, or the nails themselves. It happens with nail biting or rubbing/squeezing.
4. Skin cutting (*scarification*): scars are on the upper part of the forearms or other body parts, and possibly the genital area. It often happens by using different objects.
5. Hand soreness by too much washing: often the person thinks that there are bacteria everywhere and therefore needs to wash very frequently.
6. Nose or ear picking: damage of skin at the nose or ear by squeezing, rubbing, or using instruments on the nose or ears.
7. Lip licking: it is common in babies, but later in life it leads to lip damage caused by the habits of licking or washing lips.
8. Cheek biting: the cheeks on one or both sides of the inner mouth with white lines parallel to the teeth or wounds. It is a nervous tic.

What is the treatment?

The treatment is a combination of several steps. There is no single special ointment or drug which alone helps to reduce the behaviour. If you have one or more of these problems, please go see a dermatologist with some knowledge about psychodermatology.

You will receive a proposal about a treatment regimen which includes:

1. An ointment to take care of your skin.
2. Bandages or plasters are helpful to avoid picking behaviour.
3. If you have a clear decision to change your behaviour and a real motivation for additional psychological management, it will be helpful. "Psychodermatologists" can introduce you to this approach possibly in collaboration with another mental health professional (i.e. psychologist, psychiatrist) and inform you about the following psychotherapeutic options:
 - a. Avoid your habits by a behavioural program: implementation of an alternative habit with a positive feedback for yourself to increase success.
 - b. Relaxation training (e.g. muscle relaxation, awareness therapy, yoga, etc.).
 - c. More insight on oriented psychotherapy if personal problems are evident.
 - d. Family therapy or looking back to your family relationship.
 - e. Additional psychotherapy (e.g. body therapy, art therapy, hypnosis, etc.).

4. Medications:

- a. Psychotropic drugs (drugs that work on your nerves or brain): antidepressants with some anxiolytic (anxiety-relieving) effects are often helpful. Another possibility are neuroleptic drugs (with tranquilizing effects) which are rarely used. They could have side effects (mainly short-term).
- b. New drug strategies are in development like acetylcysteine, where some studies show positive effects.



Fig. 1-3 Photographs of skin picking

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 clinician will be able to advise in greater detail.

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