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Notalgia Paraesthetica the “invisible itch”

Itchy skin is usually caused by a rash. If you have itchy skin all over, without a rash, it may be the result of underlying medical problems, like diabetes, or diseases of the nervous system, liver, kidneys or thyroid. Medications can sometimes cause itching, but usually they also cause a rash. *Notalgia paraesthetica* is a common condition that causes periodic intense itching in a small area of skin without any rash. The itch usually is usually located near the lower shoulder blades (midway down the back), but can occur elsewhere. The area itches so much that the affected person wants to scratch at it and often will use a back scratcher, a door casing or fingernails to rub the itchy area. A rash may result from repeated scratching, and this may lead to darker color and thicker skin over the area. Notalgia paraesthetica can last for years and is sometimes associated with some discomfort or a “pins and needles” sensation. It affects older people more than younger people and sometimes affects other family members (can be inherited).

Causes

The exact cause is unknown but it is thought to result from degenerative changes in the spine resulting in pressure on nerves that convey the itch sensation. Degenerative spine disease is much more common in older people and would explain why this is a condition that is much more common in middle aged and the elderly people. Other conditions like arthritis and multiple sclerosis have been also associated with notalgia paraesthetica.

Treatment

There is no easy cure for notalgia paresthetica. Most treatment is temporary and aimed at relieving the itch sensation. Immediate relief can be obtained by scratching the area (as most people do), or by applying ice, or a topical numbing (anesthetic) medication such as over the counter benzocaine (Lanacane) to the area. Longer term relief can be obtained by applying over the counter capsaicin cream three times daily to the area. This medicine blocks the skin nerves ability to cause the itch sensation. Capsaicin causes a hot prickly sensation on the skin when you first start using it. After a few days this discomfort is lessened. Continued treatment is needed to prevent the itch from returning. Other treatments have included oxcarbazepine (Trileptal) and gabapentin (Neurontin) pills, botulinum toxin (Botox) injections, and spinal nerve injections (spinal blocks). Anti-itch pills like hydroxyzine (Atarax) can sometimes help alleviate the itch. Spinal adjustments by a chiropractor, neck and spinal massage, and acupuncture can be tried.



The itchy area on the mid back is circled. Note the slightly darkened skin from years of scratching the area.

Brachioradial Pruritis - Another type of notalgia paraesthetica

Brachioradial pruritus is a periodic itching on one or both forearms, and sometimes the upper arms and shoulders. This is thought to arise from compression on nerves in the neck. In some people sun exposure to the skin makes the itching worse. Treatment involves sun protection, application of ice packs, spinal adjustments of the neck, and other treatments as used for nostalgia paraesthetica, as discussed above.

