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fitness

NEW SCIENCE

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WEIGHT

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ARMS,
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BUTT!

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IN 15 MINUTES FLAT

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METABOLISM
ONE NO-SWEAT MOVE

Ditch the Itch

Being comfortable in your own skin isn't just a cliché about boosting self-esteem—it's a full-on physical challenge when you get rashes, hives and other irritating breakouts just from wearing a wool sweater or going for a run. →

By Joanne Chen

There are few sensations as miserable as chronic itch—or as mysterious, researchers say. The prickly, tickly sensation isn't fully understood, but there are centers devoted to studying the phenomenon. The way it often works: Something your body deems as suspicious, such as a coarse fabric, penetrates the skin, throwing the immune system into a state of emergency. To protect itself, the body releases chemicals, such as histamines and cytokines, that activate nerve fibers, which then send impulses to alert your brain that you feel itchy.

One thing that's clear is the suffering that itch causes. Among the up to 25 percent of people throughout the world who are dogged at times by chronic itching—for six-plus weeks—some report that they would rather

feel pain. And while women put off their dermatologist appointments for acne or suspicious moles, they insist on coming in ASAP when they have an itch, reports Amy Wechsler, M.D., a dermatologist and psychiatrist in New York City. "The number-one cause of itch is dry skin,

which women are more prone to getting," Dr. Wechsler adds.

Something making your skin crawl? Here's how to finally get some relief.

"This wool sweater is driving me crazy!"

You most likely have sensitive skin, which means its barrier has cracks in it that allow irritating materials like coarse fibers or harsh detergents to slip in and trigger nerve fibers to send itch signals to the brain, says Gil Yosipovitch, M.D., the director of the Temple Itch Center at Temple University School of Medicine in Philadelphia. It could also be atopic dermatitis (AD), a common, chronic type of eczema (the general term for an itchy rash) that flares up periodically.

Soothe it. If the itch persists after you've banished the sweater to the deep corners of your closet, you probably have AD, explains Matthew Zirwas, M.D., a dermatologist at The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center in Columbus. Apply a thin

layer of 1 percent hydrocortisone cream to the affected area to calm inflammation within a day. For severe or ongoing cases of AD, you may need to see your doctor for a stronger topical drug like prescription Elidel or Protopic. To help combat dry skin and prevent AD breakouts, slather on fragrance-free lotion or cream post-shower—the more parched your skin, the more emollient a product you need—to bolster your skin's barrier and seal in moisture. Apply a thicker layer to rash-prone spots and reapply as needed throughout the day. Don't want to change your wool-wearing ways? Pop on a protective base layer such as a silk shirt, which is more tightly woven than other fabrics, to prevent coarse sweater strands from poking your skin. Or buy wool clothing made with finer fibers (splurge on that cashmere top—doctor's orders!), which are less likely to cause irritation.

"My feet are on fire."

The obvious suspect is athlete's foot. This fungal infection, which

How Not to Scratch an Itch

Keep your fingernails away! Scratching may offer short-term relief, but it leaves little cuts on the skin, which can signal the immune system to release even more itch-inducing chemicals. It may also trigger the production of the feel-good chemical serotonin, according to preliminary research in animals. Problem is, serotonin can also activate nerves that heighten itch intensity. So the more you scratch, the more you itch. Here's how to end this vicious cycle.

CHILL OUT

Some Itch and pain pathways overlap, and one can override the other. Try applying a cold compress or chilling your moisturizer before use. "The cold sensation will become more dominant and alleviate itching," explains Gil Yosipovitch, M.D., of the Temple Itch Center.

DE-STRESS DAILY

Do yoga, tai chi or any exercise that helps you relax. Stress hormones cause the release of inflammatory compounds that activate nerve fibers and weaken the skin barrier, making it prone to dryness and foreign invaders, both of which can worsen itch.

OCCUPY YOURSELF

Distraction activates parts of the brain that lessen the itch sensation and the desire to scratch. In women, a recent study in *PlosOne* found. Read an engrossing book or call a friend, says Richard Fried, M.D., Ph.D., a dermatologist and psychologist in Yardley, Pennsylvania.

PRACTICE MINDFULNESS

Place your hand over the itch and repeat the mantra "smooth and soothe." Sounds corny, but thinking positive thoughts may help take the edge off the itch, Dr. Fried suggests. Outbreaks of psoriasis (a skin disease characterized by red, itchy patches) cleared up more quickly when sufferers listened to a meditative recording in addition to their usual treatment, a classic study in *Psychosomatic Medicine* revealed.

causes scaly skin and often crops up between toes, loves damp environments, so you may have picked it up in the gym locker room or even from wearing sweaty running shoes.

Soothe it. Treat athlete's foot with an over-the-counter antifungal spray like Tinactin or Lotrimin; if that doesn't work within two weeks, see your doctor, who may prescribe a more potent topical or oral med. And don't scratch, which will make the itch worse! Use a separate washcloth or pouf for your feet when showering and towel off your feet last, then throw the towel in the wash. To prevent the fungus in the first place, wear flip-flops in wet public areas like the swimming pool and the shower at the gym and try not to wear the same shoes every day, so they have time to air out. You can also use over-the-counter antifungal powders to keep your feet dry, but not baby powder, which actually feeds the fungus, says Cameron Rokhsar, M.D., an assistant professor of dermatology at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City.

"I break out in hives when I run in warm weather."

You may be experiencing heat hives, officially known as cholinergic urticaria. Increases in internal body temperature during exercise, especially running, or even as a result of extreme stress can trigger these patches of itchy welts, as can exposure to heat in saunas and hot baths. Exactly why this happens isn't known, but it may be related to a problem with sweating, says Gyohei Egawa, M.D., Ph.D., a professor of dermatology at Kyoto University in Japan. His research shows that people who sweat too little are particularly vulnerable, probably because their bodies have a hard time cooling off.

Nearly 20 percent of women are allergic to nickel, which is often in jewelry.

Soothe it. The hives will vanish within an hour after you stop running, but you can apply an ice pack to the irritated skin to speed the process. Move your workouts to an air-conditioned gym. Or practice being in the heat by exercising for a few minutes until you break out, stopping for the day, then trying again the next day, and so on, until your body acclimates. Some doctors suggest taking an antihistamine an hour before you work out, but that rarely works, Dr. Egawa says, because histamine isn't at the root of the problem.

"My new necklace gave me a rash."

Like almost 20 percent of the female population, you probably have a nickel allergy, which is a form of contact dermatitis, a condition in which a specific compound activates the immune system. The more body piercings you have, the likelier you are to develop it. One theory is that because most earring studs contain nickel and they're inserted immediately upon piercing, the skin associates nickel with trauma, Dr. Zirwas says. For a small percentage of sufferers, eating foods that contain nickel—whole grains, nuts, beans and canned foods—may exacerbate the itch.

Soothe it. Apply a 1 percent hydrocortisone cream to the rash

as needed and avoid contact with nickel to eliminate the itch within two weeks to (if you've had it for a while) two months, Dr. Zirwas recommends. To limit your exposure to common nickel-infused metals, wear only platinum jewelry, choose coated fasteners and zippers (or cover them yourself with clear nail polish), opt for plastic or titanium eyeglass frames and cover smartphones and tablets with a nonmetallic case.

"My tush feels soooo uncomfortable in cycling class."

Sounds like you've got pruritus ani, or itchy butt. Many sufferers find the condition too embarrassing to bring up to their doctor; and, in taking matters into their own hands (by obsessively washing or applying ointment to the area), they make the situation worse. What prompts the condition is unknown, but, surprisingly, it's *not* caused by sweating during exercise and can happen to anyone, according to Richard Billingham, M.D., an emeritus clinical professor at the University of Washington in Seattle. **Soothe it.** Keep in mind that poor hygiene is rarely the cause. Over-cleaning, however, is an irritant, Dr. Billingham warns. So wipe your business with wet toilet paper to clean more effectively but blot dry to limit irritation, he recommends. Also apply cornstarch to the area to absorb any remaining wetness and/or leave a square of cotton (not gauze or toilet paper) in place during the day. Try to normalize bowel movements, because diarrhea can be a source of excessive wiping; avoid drinking too much fluid. And skip the creams and ointments, which aren't effective, Dr. Billingham says. You'll be back in the saddle—working on the kind of hot butt you actually want—in no time. ●