# Understanding lichen sclerosus and its cancer risks



Lichen sclerosis, a lesser-known skin condition, has recently gained attention due to its potential association with an increased risk of cancer. This condition can manifest in individuals of any age or skin colour, though it is particularly prevalent among women over the age of 50.

According to the NHS, lichen sclerosus is characterised by itchy white patches that predominantly appear on the genital area. While there is currently no known cure for the condition, various treatments are available to help alleviate the symptoms. The condition can cause significant discomfort, and sufferers may experience pain during sexual intercourse due to the tightening of the vulva or issues with the foreskin in males.

Ellie, a mother of two, shared her personal experience with lichen sclerosus after first noticing a "tiny white rash" on her breast. Initially, she dismissed it, but when the rash persisted, she sought medical advice and was referred to a specialist. In her account, Ellie noted, "I was told I was lucky my doctor was 'on the ball' as most wouldn't have picked up on it as it wasn't where you would normally find the rash,” as reported by the Express. Upon examination, the specialist confirmed the diagnosis and detected the condition in other regions of her body, including her vulva, which she was previously unaware of due to a lack of additional symptoms. Ellie mentioned, "Since then they have developed but I can keep them at bay with cream. I've been told to keep an eye on it but it is really hard to spot because of where it is."

Though the exact etiology of lichen sclerosus remains unclear, hypotheses suggest it may result from the immune system erroneously attacking the skin, with some studies proposing a genetic predisposition. The NHS clarifies that lichen sclerosus is not caused by an infection or poor hygiene and is not contagious, meaning it cannot be transmitted through sexual contact.

The NHS outlines the typical symptoms of lichen sclerosus, which include:

* Itchy white patches on the skin
* Smooth or crinkled texture
* Skin that is easily damaged, potentially bleeding or causing pain upon friction

These patches often appear around the vaginal opening and anus, but can occur elsewhere on the body. The potential complications of lichen sclerosus elevate concerns, as the condition is linked to an increased risk of cancers in the vulva, penis, and anus. While the overall risk is considered low, it is significant enough that the NHS recommends regular self-examinations and consultation with a general practitioner if any concerning symptoms arise, including lumps or changes in skin texture.

Data from the period between 2017 and 2019 indicates there were 1,401 new cases of vulval cancer, 761 cases of penile cancer, and 1,557 cases of anal cancer in the UK. Patients diagnosed with lichen sclerosus are advised to manage their symptoms with prescribed steroid ointments, which are noted to be effective in providing relief despite the absence of a definitive cure.

In summary, awareness of lichen sclerosus and its symptoms is essential for those at risk, particularly women over 50, as early detection and management can significantly influence the quality of life and health outcomes for individuals affected by this skin condition.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28124469/> - This study supports the claim that lichen sclerosus is associated with an increased risk of vulvar and vaginal cancer. It highlights the importance of monitoring and care for individuals with lichen sclerosus due to this elevated cancer risk.
* <https://coyleinstitute.com/can-lichen-sclerosus-become-cancerous/> - This resource discusses the relationship between lichen sclerosus and the increased risk of vulvar cancer, emphasizing the need for early detection and management to reduce cancer risk.
* <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35285455/> - This systematic review confirms that vulvar lichen sclerosus is linked to a higher risk of vulvar cancer, particularly in the presence of differentiated vulvar intraepithelial neoplasia (dVIN) and with advancing age.
* <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/lichen-sclerosus/> - This NHS webpage describes the symptoms and characteristics of lichen sclerosus, including its typical appearance as itchy white patches, and clarifies that it is not caused by infection or poor hygiene.
* <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/vulval-cancer/about/type> - This resource provides information on vulval cancer types and risk factors, which can be related to the discussion of lichen sclerosus increasing the risk of vulval cancer.
* <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/anal-cancer/about/key-statistics.html> - Although not directly discussing lichen sclerosus and anal cancer, this webpage provides context on anal cancer statistics, which can relate to the broader discussion of increased cancer risk associated with lichen sclerosus.