Dear Alice,

For about two months now my whole body had been itchy and will sometimes break out into a rash. I tried switching soaps and laundry detergent; I just don't know what it is. It's on my arms, legs, back, inner thighs, feet, etc. I'm scared and really want to find out what's wrong and stop itching.

Answer

Dear Reader,

What you’re describing sounds like a case of dermatitis, or inflammation of the skin. The rashes and pruritus (itchy skin) that result from the dermatitis may be difficult to deal with?not only are they physically uncomfortable, but they may also cause embarrassment or self-consciousness. These skin conditions can be mildly painful, but fortunately, they’re rarely indicative of more serious health concerns. Rashes like the one you describe usually result from environmental factors, rather than internal health issues, so you may find some relief through self-care strategies. If those practices don’t work, you may try talking with a health care provider to rule out other causes of this itch you can’t seem to scratch. Keep reading for more on possible culprits and what action you can take to hopefully find some relief.

If your skin is red, sore, or inflamed, you may be experiencing contact dermatitis. Contact dermatitis occurs when your skin comes into contact with an irritant or allergen, and often looks and feels much like a sunburn. More specifically:

- **Irritant contact dermatitis** occurs when the skin comes into contact with acidic substances such as soaps, detergents, and fabric softeners. You mentioned that you’ve switched soaps and laundry detergent, so it’s possible that your skin is reacting to another irritant, such as latex gloves, shampoos, pesticides, hair dyes, or cement, among others.
- **Allergic contact dermatitis**, which usually manifests as a streaky or patchy rash, occurs when the skin touches or rubs against various allergens. Though the type of allergen may vary from person to person, common culprits include nail polish, fragrances, topical antibiotics, eyelash or toupee adhesives, nickel, poison ivy or oak, and latex. Latex allergies are particularly common and are typically non-life threatening. Allergic contact dermatitis might appear even if you’ve been exposed to the allergen many times before with no previous reaction. However, it may take 24 to 48
hours for the rash to even appear post-exposure, which can make the process of narrowing down the exact source of the reaction somewhat complicated.

If you’d like to test how your skin may react to different products, such as lotions or creams, you can try a patch test: put a dab of the product on your forearm and cover it with a small bandage. Repeat that same process for three or four days. A day or two later you can check to see if your skin has any type of reaction. If you don’t see any rash or skin irritation, it’s probably less likely to cause irritation moving forward.

With these types of dermatitis, there are a few methods to try first to see if your condition will clear on its own given two or three weeks. They include:

- Rinse the affected area with plain lukewarm water to get rid of any residual traces of the irritant or allergen on the skin.
- Use mild, fragrance-free emollients or moisturizers to keep the skin moist.
- Apply over-the-counter corticosteroid skin cream or ointment to reduce inflammation. Use corticosteroids sparingly, because overuse may lead to additional skin concerns.

If your rash doesn’t improve after trying these strategies and you’re still concerned, a good next step might be to talk with your health care provider or an allergy specialist who can conduct skin patch tests of common allergens to pinpoint the exact substance to which your skin is reacting.

There are a few other common skin conditions you might be experiencing, all of which can be diagnosed and treated by a medical professional:

- **Seborrheic dermatitis**: Symptoms include flaky, white or silver-colored scales, accompanied by unusually oily skin. This type of dermatitis is often found on the scalp as dandruff (but can be found other places on the body as well). Various steroid creams, antifungal lotions, and anti-dandruff shampoos are used to treat this condition.
- **Atopic dermatitis**: A chronic skin condition characterized by an itchy, scaly rash, usually caused by hypersensitive skin. Often called ?eczema,? this condition commonly begins in childhood. Treatment includes topical steroids and emollients.
- **Psoriasis**: A red, irritated rash with silvery-white patches of skin, usually found on the scalp, elbows, and knees. This condition doesn’t usually appear until early adulthood. Topical creams and ointments may be useful for mild cases. For more severe, light therapy and oral medications may also be used in addition to topical treatments.

Again, if you haven’t found some relief on your own or if your skin condition worsens, it may be wise to get it checked out to get some answers. Although itchy skin is most likely a dermatological condition, it’s also possible that there’s another underlying cause for your discomfort. Your rash and itchiness may be caused by a systemic (arising from the organs or the body in general), neurologic (arising from the nervous system), psychogenic (having a psychological origin) issue, or a combination of them. In any case, talking with your health care provider may help you rule out these causes and work toward getting some relief.

Here’s hoping the itching ends soon,

Alice!
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