Cutaneous T-Cell Lymphoma (CTCL)

Cutaneous T-cell lymphoma (CTCL) is a rare cancer that starts in T-cells (a type of white blood cell). CTCL is not contagious but is hard to diagnose. You may need more than 1 skin biopsy before cancer cells are found.

CTCL is often a long-term condition. Some people have times when symptoms improve or go away. Symptoms can come back later. Regular visits with your care team can help manage the disease. Many people continue their normal daily activities during treatment.

Mycosis fungoides is the most common type of CTCL. It often grows slowly and may stay in the skin for many years.

Sézary syndrome is a more aggressive type. It affects the skin and spreads to the blood. It can cause widespread redness, severe itching, and feeling ill.

There are also rare types of CTCL that may look and act differently.

Signs and Symptoms

CTCL can look like other skin problems. It is often mistaken for eczema or other rashes. You may have:

- Dry, scaly patches on the skin
- Raised red, brown, or purple areas
- Light patches of skin color
- Widespread redness or peeling skin
- Severe itching or burning
- Hair loss
- Swollen lymph nodes
- Feeling very tired

Cause

The exact cause of CTCL is unknown. It may be linked to changes in the immune system, changes in genes, or long-term exposure to some chemicals.

The risk is higher in:

- Adults older than 50
- Assigned men at birth
- People with a weak immune system

Treatment

Treatment depends on the type of CTCL and how far it has spread. Your care team may include a dermatologist, oncologist, and hematologist.

Common types of **skin treatment** include:

- Steroid creams or ointments to reduce itch and swelling
- Chemotherapy creams or gels to kill cancer cells in the skin
- Immune creams that help the body fight cancer
- Light therapy (phototherapy) with UV light
- Radiation for thick lesions or tumors

Common types of **whole-body treatment** include:

- Medicines
- IV treatments such as immunotherapy or chemotherapy
- Photopheresis, which treats blood outside the body before returning it
- Stem cell transplant in some advanced cases

Skin Care at Home

These tips may help protect your skin:

- Use fragrance-free creams or ointments every day
- Take short showers with lukewarm water
- Use gentle, unscented soaps and laundry products
- Avoid scratching your skin
- Wear soft clothing, such as cotton
- Protect your skin from the sun, especially if you take retinoids
- Tell your provider about all vitamins, supplements, and other medicines you take

When to Call

Call your provider if you have:

- New or worsening skin changes
- Severe itching or burning that affects sleep or daily activities
- New lumps or swollen lymph nodes
- Fever, chills, or signs of infection
- Questions about your treatment or medicine

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 10/2026 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing HF#8546