

**[Ask The Expert]**

# What's causing those embarrassing flakes on my shoulders?



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Special correspondent

**D**andruff is a common skin problem, but the relentless shedding of unsightly scales can cause sufferers considerable distress.

The underlying itching prompts patients to scratch, causing more scales to fall. The resulting “snow-storm” often leads them to retreat from social interaction, resulting in feelings of isolation and depression.

No one knows for sure what causes this disorder, but current studies support a complex interaction between the skin’s epidermal cells (outermost layer), skin oils and yeast organisms known as *Malassezia* that normally reside on the skin.

Inflammation appears to stimulate the scale production in those so predisposed. The scale is composed of abnormal epidermal cells that have not matured properly and trap skin oils, causing the characteristic “greasy” scale. These skin oils provide abundant nutrients for the *Malassezia* organisms to flourish, producing free fatty acids that further drive the inflammation. Inflammation then results in itching.

Dandruff often occurs along with seborrheic dermatitis — an inflammatory rash that occurs on the face and chest, predominately along the sides of the nose, in and behind the ears, and between the eyes. We believe dandruff and seborrheic dermatitis are intimately related. They can occur separately, together or follow one another. In my experience, stress is a major trigger, especially for the facial/chest variety.

The condition often occurs in association with rosacea. Rosacea is also a common inflammatory disorder that worsens with stress, with the common denominator being increased oil production. It is characterized by pimple-like blemishes on a background of redness and is associated with flushing.

Not all scaling on the scalp is the type of dandruff related to seborrheic dermatitis. Other common conditions

that can result in scaling include xerosis (dry skin), eczema, psoriasis and fungal infections. Standard treatments for the oily scales of dandruff actually may worsen the dry scales of eczema!

The good news is that you don’t have to suffer from embarrassment any longer. Although it usually isn’t curable, treatment can control the condition, and long-term remissions are common. For scalp dandruff, frequent shampooing is a must to dislodge the oil-laden scales. Using a medicated dandruff shampoo, either over the counter or by prescription, can help.

Shampoos containing zinc pyrithione and selenium sulfide work by inhibiting the *Malassezia* organisms. Tar shampoos slow down the proliferation of the epidermal cells and suppress inflammation. Prescription antibacterial shampoos (ciclopirox and ketoconazole) may be necessary for stubborn cases. Your dermatologist also likely will prescribe a topical cortisone solution or foam to help quell the inflammation.

For the facial seborrheic dermatitis, using an over-the-counter 1 percent hydrocortisone cream after gentle cleansing may be sufficient. If not, your dermatologist likely will prescribe a wash containing sulfur and sulfacetamide, along with a stronger cortisone cream as well as ketoconazole cream.

Controlling your stress is also helpful, as your oil glands pump out more oil under these circumstances. If you need more information, see your dermatologist.

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