Dear Alice,

I don't exercise often, but when I do, after about twenty minutes of walking, my legs start itching like mad. Usually after a couple days, it stops. What causes this itching?

Answer

Dear Reader,

It’s good you’re not running from your itching issue! Trying to get to the bottom of what’s causing this itch is smart. While most causes of itching after physical activity may cause little harm and are also relatively common (such as dry skin), in rare cases, the “mad” itching could be indicative of a more serious health issue. Taking note of any accompanying symptoms and considering some do-it-yourself options may be in order. If still don’t find relief, it may be time to bring this up with a medical professional.

Now, time to talk about a number of issues that may be causing your itchy legs:

- **Dry skin:** Since you didn’t mention any other symptoms, dry skin could be the culprit. Are you walking outside or inside? Often, dry weather conditions can cause or exacerbate dry skin. It may not always result in redness, bumps, or blisters, but long-term itching can lead to irritation from persistent scratching. Changing to a mild cleanser, avoiding hot showers, and using a scent-free moisturizer may be all it takes to banish dry skin. A more stubborn itch may point to a different cause. If, despite home remedies, you’re still experiencing itchy skin after two weeks, or if you also have co-occurring symptoms such as fatigue, frequent urination, weight loss, fever, redness, or change in bowel movements, you might want to check in with a health care provider.

- **Skin irritation:** Have you switched detergents, started using a new lotion, or are you using a new soap? If so, try eliminating these products one-by-one and see if the itching subsides. Perhaps you’ve recently switched up your running gear? It’s generally recommended that individuals with sensitive skin stick to loose cotton clothes when working out and avoid synthetic materials.

- **Underlying conditions:** Conditions such as nerve disorders or illnesses including liver disease, thyroid conditions, anemia, or kidney failure, may contribute to an itchy feeling. In
these instances, the itching would be a symptom rather than the condition itself.

- **Exercise-induced urticaria:** In very rare cases, this condition could cause itchy legs by way of hives that appear during or after physical activity; however, it's often accompanied by other, more serious, symptoms. Difficulty swallowing or breathing, wheezing, or feelings of tightness in the chest or throat are all signs that it's best consult with a medical provider. They might help you find if there is some other factor (such as food) that's correlated with the itching episodes or prescribe you an epinephrine to control your symptoms. If you notice the development of hives while being physically active, it's best to stop the activity immediately.

If your itching doesn't coincide with other symptoms, there are some actions you could take that might offer some relief:

- **Moisturize daily.** Opt for a fragrance free, hypoallergenic lotion to avoid any added skin reactions.
- **Avoid the cause of the itching.** You might need to experiment with different detergents, clothes during physical activity, shower temperatures, etc. to see if there's something besides being physically active that's irritating your skin.
- **Try soothing creams, gels, or lotions.** Occasional use of over-the-counter corticosteroid creams may offer some relief from itching. Lotions with calamine, menthol, or a topical anesthetic could also be helpful.
- **Try to reduce stress.** Stress can make itching worse, so engaging in relaxation techniques or counseling might have the added benefit of soothing your skin.
- **Take some non-prescription allergy medicine.** Taking antihistamines can be a way to reduce itching during the night as it causes drowsiness.
- **Use a humidifier.** Heating and dry winter weather can dehydrate the skin, and humidifiers combat this dryness by adding moisture back into the air.
- **Avoid itchy or tight clothes.** Wearing light, loose materials can help skin stay cool and avoid irritation.

If you're still squirming with discomfort after trying these methods, a medical provider can help you get to the bottom of what could be causing the ants in your pants. They might offer some more options by prescribing topical or oral medication or even light therapy, where your skin is exposed to a frequency of light over multiple sessions. Being able to provide some background information may also help your provider get to the bottom of your itchiness: Has the itching just started? Do you experience itchy legs at other times besides right after walking? Perhaps after eating certain foods? Or, after experiencing emotional stress? Are there additional symptoms that accompany your itchy legs? Are you feeling pain? Your answers to these questions may be useful as you and your provider seek to find the cause of your itchiness. Together you can come up with a plan that will take the scratch out of your stride.

Alice!

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Resources

Medical Services (Morningside)
Medical Services (CUIMC)

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