

Itchy legs? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

What can I do about my itchy legs? It's getting pretty bad lately and lotion doesn't seem to help. Also I'm a runner. Does that have anything to do with it?

Signed, Scratching

Answer

Dear Scratching,

That itch that you just can't scratch may be more than skin deep. Usually though, dry skin is the most common cause of itching, particularly the all-over itch, or the itch that covers a wide area such as the back or legs. The fact that you are a runner could be contributing, too. When you increase physical activity, the little capillaries in your skin expand rapidly to increase blood flow, which triggers neighboring nerves to send impulses that the brain interprets as an itching sensation. This generally decreases as your body adjusts to the new workout routine. If running is nothing new for you, it's more likely a dry skin issue. Dry, itchy skin can be caused by a variety of things. Possibilities include:

- Indoor heat combined with outdoor chill during the winter.
- A reduction in the natural oils your skin produces as you age.
- Frequent bathing, especially with soap.
- Wearing wool or synthetic fabric.
- Perspiration.
- Frequent swimming.

See if you can cure your itch by taking the following steps:

- Keep your baths and showers short and use lukewarm (not hot) water. Try cutting back to two or three a week and sponge bathing the rest of the time.
- Choose a mild soap over deodorant soap and use as little of it as you can.

- If you take baths, consider adding bath oil, cornstarch, or instant or colloidal oatmeal to the water.
- Pat yourself dry instead of rubbing.
- Apply a moisturizing body oil or lotion, especially after a bath or shower, avoiding products that contain alcohol, which is drying.
- Make sure all clothing is well rinsed when washed. Try switching to a detergent that doesn't contain perfume and discontinue use of fabric softeners, bleaches, and other laundry additives to see if that helps. Wear cotton instead of wool or synthetics. Permanent-press and wrinkle-resistant fabrics may have formaldehyde or other irritating chemicals in their finish. Wash new clothing and towels before using them.
- Try not to scratch. You may irritate the skin further.

If these don't work and you find that the majority of the itching occurs during physical activity, you may have to dig a little deeper for the cause. If you notice that self-treatment doesn't bring relief within a few weeks, you may want to consider seeing a health care provider. Unexplained generalized itching can be a symptom of any number of serious disorders — so if you can't explain the itching and it won't quit with some of the above suggested changes, you need to make sure that it isn't a sign of underlying illness. The likelihood is that your itchiness is only skin-deep — but if it doesn't go away with home remedies, there are a number of treatments your health care provider or dermatologist can suggest you try, from oral anti-histamines to phototherapy. Happy running!

Alice!

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