

In a pickle over prickle — why does wearing wool make me itch? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

Is there any cure for itching when I wear wool clothes? In the winter time, I love to wear my wool pants and sweaters, but they make me itch. I've tried wearing pantyhose underneath, but it doesn't work.

Help.

Signed, Itchy Wool

Answer

Dear Itchy Wool,

When it comes to garments made of wool, and even acrylic or other fibrous materials, the prickle and itch factor can be a major determinant of whether or not one can wear such items comfortably. The irritating effect of wearing wool directly on the skin has long been thought to be the result of an allergy to the wool itself. With continuing research in this area, it's becoming more and more clear that few people have a true allergy to wool, and that it's the mechanics of the fiber itself that irritate the skin. This appears to be especially true in people with sensitizing skin conditions, such as eczema or atopic dermatitis, who are already more susceptible to discomfort from wearing clothing against their skin made with these materials.

It's likely that pain receptors are largely responsible for the prickle that's perceived from wearing wool and other fibers. People vary in how they experience prickle and itch sensations from contact with natural and synthetic fibers. In some particularly sensitive folks, their skin can redden from the exposure. The sensation can also depend on individual factors, such as:

- Thickness of the skin (with thinner skin being more sensitive)
- Age (younger folks have thinner skin and so may be more sensitive)
- Temperature (the itch increases with heat)
- Moisture on the skin (the more the itchier)

Qualities of the fibers themselves, such as length and thickness, may play parts in causing skin discomfort as well. For example, shorter fibers seem to accentuate the perception of prickle, as there are more fiber ends to be felt in any given surface area of fabric. Similarly, coarser fibers appear more likely to intensify prickling sensation than their finer counterparts.

So, there are many options a person can try to limit or prevent the prickle and itch when wearing fibrous textiles. The most obvious being to avoid wearing them altogether, particularly recommended for people with eczema. This doesn't seem like an option for you, considering how much you love to wear your warm woolen garments during the winter. The pantyhose you've tried apparently are an inadequate barrier. Consider using other lining materials, such as thin knit silk or cotton undergarments, or perhaps even woven nylon or polyester pants liners, all of which can be found in the lingerie department of many apparel stores. Buy pants and skirts that are already nearly or fully lined. Avoiding prolonged contact with fibrous materials can help. Another option is wearing only "high end" wools, which often have sufficiently fine fibers.

Hope these suggestions sufficiently scratched your itch,

Alice!

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