

Patient information from BMJ

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Scalp ringworm

Despite the name, ringworm has nothing to do with worms. It's a skin infection caused by a fungus, a lot like the one that causes athlete's foot.

What is scalp ringworm?

You get ringworm when a certain fungus infects your skin. Fungal infections can affect any part of your body. When they affect the scalp they tend to cause patches of hair loss. The medical name for ringworm on the scalp is tinea capitis.

Scalp ringworm is particularly common in children, but adults can get it too.

Children can pick up a fungal infection in several ways:

- Through close contact with someone else who has it
- By touching personal items (such as a comb, towels, or bedding) that have the ringworm fungus on them
- From soil
- From contact with an infected animal. For example, dogs and cats can get ringworm, as can some farm animals, such as cows.

What are the symptoms?

When ringworm affects a smooth patch of skin it can cause a ring-shaped rash. This is how it gets its name. But scalp ringworm symptoms are slightly different. Scalp ringworm causes patches of hair loss. The skin in these patches may look grey or be covered in black dots. The dots are hairs that have broken off.

Children with scalp ringworm may also have a flaky scalp that looks like bad dandruff. Your child's scalp may itch, or even be quite sore. Severe ringworm of the scalp can turn into a tender, inflamed area called a **kerion**.

Doctors sometimes do laboratory tests on scalp ringworm, by brushing or scraping some flakes of skin from your child's scalp. But if your doctor suspects your child has scalp ringworm he or she will probably want to start treatment early, without waiting for test results.

What treatments work?

The treatment for scalp ringworm is antifungal tablets. There are also some steps you can take to stop your child spreading ringworm to anyone else.

Drug treatments

Depending on which drug treatment your doctor recommends, your child will need to take the tablets for between two and eight weeks. It's important that they finish the course of tablets as instructed by their doctor.

Antifungal tablets can sometimes cause side effects in some people, including nausea, stomach pain, headaches, or a rash.

You could also try using antifungal shampoos. They don't help get rid of ringworm, but they can help to reduce the spread of the fungus to other people. If your child uses antifungal shampoo he or she will still need to take their antifungal tablets.

Stopping ringworm spreading or coming back

It's fine for children to go to school while they're having treatment for scalp ringworm.

But your child shouldn't share things such as towels, bedding, hats, combs, or hairbrushes. Make sure you wash towels, clothes, and bedding regularly. To stop your child getting infected again after treatment, wash their combs and brushes with a disinfectant, such as diluted bleach.

If you think a pet has ringworm, take it to the vet. Ringworm on animals usually looks like a bald patch on their fur. If you don't have your pet treated your child could catch ringworm again.

What will happen?

Ringworm can be cured with treatment. But without treatment the infection can last a long time. It's important that your child gets treatment, as severe scalp ringworm could cause a bald patch on his or her scalp.

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