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Morgellons disease: Managing a mysterious skin condition

By Mayo Clinic staff

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Morgellons disease is mysterious and controversial. Here you'll find answers to common questions about Morgellons disease — and suggestions for coping with it.

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Morgellons disease is the popular name for an unexplained skin disorder characterized by disfiguring sores and crawling sensations on and under the skin. Morgellons disease also features fibers or solid materials emerging from these sores.

Researchers with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have concluded that Morgellons disease, which they refer to as an unexplained dermatopathy, isn't caused by an infection or parasites. Fibers found in the sores are usually wisps of cotton thread, probably coming from clothing or bandages.

CDC experts note that the signs and symptoms of Morgellons disease are very similar to those of a mental illness involving false beliefs about infestation by parasites (delusional parasitosis).

What are the signs and symptoms of Morgellons disease?

People who have Morgellons disease report the following signs and symptoms:

- Skin rashes or sores that can cause intense itching

- Crawling sensations on and under the skin, often compared to insects moving, stinging or biting
- Fibers, threads or black stringy material in and on the skin
- Severe fatigue
- Difficulty concentrating
- Short-term memory loss

The intense itching and open sores associated with Morgellons disease can severely interfere with a person's quality of life.

How widespread is Morgellons disease?

Morgellons disease is a relatively rare condition that most frequently affects middle-aged white women. A cluster of cases occurred in California, which prompted the CDC to conduct a research study to determine if the cases were somehow related.

What do researchers know about Morgellons disease?

CDC researchers found no evidence that Morgellons disease is caused by an infectious agent or a substance in the environment. Researchers studied samples of skin, blood, urine and hair. Half of the hair samples tested positive for drugs such as marijuana, anti-anxiety medications or painkillers containing codeine derivatives.

Skin lesions most closely resembled insect or spider bites that had been worsened by scratching. The most commonly affected sites were the forearms, back, chest, face and lower legs. Some of the lesions were infected by germs commonly found on the skin, but these infections were not the cause of the lesions. No parasites were detected.

But CDC researchers weren't able to determine if Morgellons disease is a new disorder or simply another name for delusional parasitosis.

How controversial is Morgellons disease?

Current attitudes toward Morgellons disease fall into various categories:

- Some health professionals believe that Morgellons disease is a specific condition that needs to be confirmed by future research.
- Some health professionals believe that signs and symptoms of Morgellons disease are caused by another condition, often mental illness.
- Other health professionals don't acknowledge Morgellons disease or are reserving judgment until more is known about the condition.

Some people who suspect they have Morgellons disease claim they've been ignored or dismissed as fakers. In contrast, some doctors say that people who report signs and symptoms of Morgellons disease typically resist other explanations for their condition.

How can you cope with the signs and symptoms of Morgellons disease?

The signs and symptoms linked to Morgellons disease can be distressing. Even though health professionals may disagree about the nature of the condition, you deserve compassionate treatment. To manage your signs and symptoms:

- **Establish a caring health care team.** Find a doctor who acknowledges your concerns and does a thorough examination.
- **Be patient.** Your doctor will likely look for known conditions that point to evidence-based treatments before considering a diagnosis of Morgellons disease.
- **Keep an open mind.** Consider various causes for your signs and symptoms, and follow your doctor's recommendations for treatment — which may include long-term mental health therapy.
- **Seek treatment for other conditions.** Get treatment for anxiety, depression or any other condition that affects your thinking, moods or behavior.

+ References

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