

Scalp Ringworm

Ringworm is a skin infection caused by a fungus. Ringworm on the scalp usually only occurs in children. Treatment is with antifungal medication, which needs to be taken for several weeks. An antifungal shampoo is not effective alone, but may be advised in addition to medication.

What is ringworm?

Ringworm is a fungal skin infection. (It is not due to a worm as its name implies!) There are many types of fungus germs (fungi) and some can infect the skin, nails and hair. Examples of fungal infections are ringworm on the body (tinea corporis), scalp ringworm (tinea capitis) and athlete's foot (tinea pedis). This leaflet deals only with scalp ringworm, which mainly affects children and is rare in adults. (Other leaflets deal with the other types of fungal skin and nail infections.)

How can you catch ringworm?

- Most cases occur for no apparent reason. Fungi are common and an infection can occur 'out of the blue'.
- From animals. Some dogs, cats and other pets have fungal infections on their skin. They can pass on the infection, especially to children. (Animals can be treated too if you suspect a pet is the cause. See your vet.) Farm animals can also be a source. Touching a farm gate where infected animals pass through may be enough to infect your skin.
- From person to person via close touching, sharing towels, etc. Sometimes an outbreak of scalp ringworm occurs in families or schools.

What does the rash look like?

A typical infection causes a circular patch of the scalp to become scaly, itchy and inflamed. Mild infections may look like a bad patch of dandruff. The rash can sometimes look like psoriasis. A severe infection can cause pustules (boils) and hair loss over a badly inflamed patch of scalp. Your doctor may send a hair sample to the laboratory to confirm that a fungus is the cause of the rash.

What is the treatment for scalp ringworm?

Antifungal medicine

Griseofulvin, an antifungal medicine, is the usual treatment for children. It is the only antifungal medicine licensed to treat children in the US. An 8-12 week course is usually needed. It is important to finish the course to clear the fungus completely from the scalp. Adults with scalp ringworm can also take griseofulvin. However,

- You should not take it if you are pregnant.
- Men should not father a child within 6 months of treatment.

Other antifungal medicines such as terbinafine and itraconazole may be used as an alternative for adults. They may become available for children in the future once they have been shown to be safe for children to take.

Antifungal creams and shampoos

Antifungal creams or shampoos do not clear the infection fully as the fungus gets into the hair shafts where creams cannot reach. Therefore they are of no use to cure the condition. However, they do clear the fungus and the fungus spores from the hairs and surface of the scalp. So, selenium shampoo, or povidone-iodine shampoo used twice weekly may be advised *in addition* to griseofulvin medication. This is to quickly clear any surface fungi and make it much less likely for the fungus to spread to other children.

Children do not need to stay off school once treatment has started.

Preventing the spread of scalp ringworm

After a child is diagnosed as having scalp ringworm, other family members, school friends, and pets may need to be checked for fungal skin infections.