

SKIN CAN SHOW FIRST SIGNS OF SOME INTERNAL DISEASES

Unusual changes in the skin can signal problems ranging from cancer to diabetes

Miami Beach, Fla.

March 1, 2013

OVERVIEW:

Dermatologists find that the skin offers a window to what is going on inside the body and changes to the skin may signal a more serious health problem. The key is knowing how to spot these early warning signs so the internal disease can be successfully treated and before it becomes a bigger problem.

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF DERMATOLOGY EXPERT

Information provided by Cindy Owen, MD, FAAD, a board-certified dermatologist and assistant professor of dermatology at the University of Louisville in Louisville, Ky.

COMMON SIGNS SPELL INTERNAL TROUBLE

In some cases, the skin can show signs of an internal disease before the disease advances and becomes more serious; in other cases, a symptom is noticeable on the skin long after the disease begins causing damage internally. While there are hundreds of nuances of the skin that could spell trouble, a handful of general skin changes commonly signal an internal disease.

New Rash

- Unusual rash, or a rash that does not respond to treatment or is accompanied by fever, joint pain, muscle aches, or other symptoms could indicate an internal problem or infection.
 - A rash occurring on the tops of the feet and lower legs that does not respond to topical steroids or antifungals can be a sign of hepatitis C infection (necrolytic acral erythema).
- Occasionally, people will develop a rash from an allergy to a new medicine. However, it is important to monitor the rash carefully, as it could be a sign of a more serious condition known as DRESS syndrome – which stands for Drug Reaction (or Rash) with Eosinophilia and Systemic Symptoms.
 - This condition can occur weeks to months after the start of a new medication, making it very difficult to diagnose. Dr. Owen explained that this is a potentially serious medical condition that could involve inflammation of the liver, heart, lungs or thyroid. She stressed that it is important to see a dermatologist for proper diagnosis if a rash is accompanied by swelling of the face or lymph nodes, fever and/or feeling of illness.
- Dermatomyositis is an inflammatory muscle disease with notable skin changes and is associated, in up to 20 percent of cases, with a wide variety of internal cancers (ovarian cancer being the most common in women). Signs on the skin include a violet-colored rash on the upper eyelids and in areas that are exposed to sunlight, and raised, scaly bumps on the knuckles. Other skin changes can be seen on the nail folds with visible blood vessels and ragged-looking cuticles that appear thicker and separate from the nail. Dr. Owen noted that in one case with only subtle changes of the nail fold and cuticles, a patient was diagnosed with

- more -



American Academy of
Dermatology

Correspondence
PO Box 4014
Schaumburg, Illinois 60168-4014

Location
930 East Woodfield Road
Schaumburg, Illinois 60173-4729

Main: 847.330.0230
Fax: 847.330.0050
Website: www.aad.org

dermatomyositis before being diagnosed with an early stage, treatable kidney cancer.

New Growths

- Any new growths should be checked thoroughly by a board-certified dermatologist, as they could be skin cancer. Rarely, new growths can represent a metastasis or spread of an internal cancer to the skin. Also, certain tumors of the skin can be a sign of internal disease, or a genetic syndrome.
- In one example, yellow or waxy looking bumps on the arms, legs or trunk (eruptive xanthomas) could indicate high triglyceride levels, often as a sign of uncontrolled diabetes. In these instances, a biopsy in conjunction with laboratory testing can lead to diagnosis and treatment, hopefully reducing the cardiovascular risk from these conditions.

Skin Discoloration

- Skin color changes can be a sign of internal disease. In the most common example, yellowing of the skin can indicate liver disease. However, other skin color changes can be important signs as well, including darkening of the skin.
- Noticeable darkening of creases in the skin, sun-exposed areas, joints, and old scars could be a sign of adrenal disease, such as Addison's disease.
- Bronzing of the skin in a patient with diabetes can be a sign of an inherited defect in iron metabolism that leads to liver failure known as hemochromatosis.

Change in Texture

- Any unusual softening or hardening of the skin could indicate an underlying medical problem.
- Systemic sclerosis is an autoimmune disease in which one of the early signs is swelling, followed by hardening of the skin. In more severe cases, it could result in hardening of internal organs, such as the lungs or heart.
- Acanthosis nigricans is a common condition seen in overweight patients that results in darkened, velvety skin occurring in skin folds and most commonly on the back of the neck. The appearance of this textural change in the skin could indicate the presence of early diabetes. In some cases this skin change may be a sign of a cancerous tumor in an internal organ.
- Acquired cutis laxa is a rare connective tissue disease marked by very loose or doughy feeling skin that is silky to the touch. This disease could be a sign of lymphoma or multiple myeloma, and it could advance to involve loss of elasticity of other internal organs. Dr. Owen noted that with proper diagnosis, it is possible to slow the progression of the disease.

DR. OWEN'S TIPS

People can be their own best detective in noticing unusual changes in their skin, and Dr. Owen recommended seeing a dermatologist as soon as possible in these instances:

- If you notice an unusual rash that can't be attributed to a specific cause.
- If a rash is diagnosed and not responding to the prescribed treatment.
- If a rash is accompanied by fever, muscle aches or other unusual symptoms.

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF DERMATOLOGY EXPERT ADVICE:

"When examining a patient's skin for signs of skin cancer or any type of skin condition, dermatologists are always mindful of unusual markings on the skin that could indicate another medical problem," said Dr. Owen. "Dermatologists have expertise to know when signs on the skin are more than a skin problem, which is why it is important to see a board-certified dermatologist if you notice any skin changes. Doing so can ensure proper diagnosis – and in some cases stop the progression of a more serious medical condition."

###

Kara Jilek
(847) 240-1701
kjilek@aad.org

Allison Sit
(847) 240-1746
asit@aad.org

Celebrating 75 years of promoting skin, hair and nail health

Headquartered in Schaumburg, Ill., the American Academy of Dermatology (Academy), founded in 1938, is the largest, most influential, and most representative of all dermatologic associations. With a membership of more than 17,000 physicians worldwide, the Academy is committed to: advancing the diagnosis and medical, surgical and cosmetic treatment of the skin, hair and nails; advocating high standards in clinical practice, education, and research in dermatology; and supporting and enhancing patient care for a lifetime of healthier skin, hair and nails. For more information, contact the Academy at 1-888-462-DERM (3376) or www.aad.org. Follow the Academy on [Facebook](#) (American Academy of Dermatology) or [Twitter](#) (@AADskin).