

Understanding

Skin Picking (Excoriation) Disorder

A Body-Focused Repetitive Behavior

What is Skin Picking Disorder?

Skin picking (excoriation) disorder is a serious and poorly understood problem. People who suffer from skin picking disorder repetitively touch, rub, scratch, pick at or dig into their skin, often in an attempt to remove small irregularities or perceived imperfections. This behavior may result in skin discoloration or scarring. In more serious cases, severe tissue damage and visible disfigurement can result. Skin picking disorder is considered a “body-focused repetitive behavior” (BFRB) along with trichotillomania (hair pulling disorder) and onychophagia (nail biting). These behaviors are not habits or tics; nor are they considered self-injurious behaviors. Rather, they are complex disorders that cause people to repeatedly touch their body and hair in ways that result in physical damage.

Who gets skin picking disorder?

Most people pick their skin to some degree. Occasional picking at cuticles, acne, scabs, calluses or other skin irregularities is a very common human behavior. It also is not unusual for skin picking to actually become a problem, whether temporary or chronic. Studies indicate that 2-5% of people pick their skin to the point that it causes noticeable tissue damage and marked distress or impairment in daily functioning. Skin Picking Disorder may develop at any age. How the disorder progresses depends on many factors, including the stresses in a person's life, and whether or not the person seeks and finds appropriate treatment.

What causes skin picking disorder?

The cause of this disorder is not known. However, research shows that some animals also pick or chew at their bodies, causing great damage. Because of this similarity, and the fact that in some women skin picking can fluctuate with the menstrual cycle, many believe that skin picking has an underlying genetic or biological cause. Picking may also serve as an emotional outlet for some people. Repetitive skin picking appears to be a way for some people to increase their activity levels when they are bored, or to control their emotions when they are feeling anxious, tense or upset. Some individuals regulate their emotions by picking their skin. Picking may cause a person to “numb” or “zone” out as a way of dealing with feelings that seem overwhelming. However, this has not been scientifically proven.

What are the effects of skin picking disorder?

Skin picking disorder can hurt a person emotionally, physically, and socially. In addition to feeling shame and embarrassment, people with skin picking disorder may have other psychological problems like depression and anxiety. Skin picking disorder can also interfere with social life, school, and/or work. Mild to severe pain during or after picking; sores, scars, disfigurement, and other medical problems like infections may also occur. In extreme cases, skin picking may cause sores severe enough to require medical intervention.

How is skin picking disorder treated?

The Scientific Advisory Board of the TLC Foundation for Body-Focused Repetitive Behaviors recommends that sufferers begin by developing a solid understanding of their behavior and finding the emotional support they will need to address it. Sufferers and their health providers can then consider the psychological interventions, medications, and other therapies that have proven effective in helping people achieve remission.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Research supports certain forms of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) as treatment for trichotillomania and other BFRBs. CBT is a therapeutic approach focusing on the individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, which results in improved control over the behavior. Treatment should be tailored to the individual's needs as there is no protocol that works for every case. Visit www.bfrb.org for referrals to BFRB treatment providers.

Medication

No medication is currently approved by the Food & Drug Administration (FDA) for treatment of BFRBs, though a few have proven to reduce symptoms in some individuals. Medications may also be useful in treating co-existing problems such as anxiety or depression. ***Request our booklet “Expert Consensus Treatment Guidelines” for more detailed information.***

Education and Support

Patients and their loved ones alike may benefit from the social support and motivation of participating in a support group. The foundation maintains a database of support groups around the country for people with BFRBs, and also moderates online groups for kids, teens, parents and adults. The foundation provides brochures, webinars, regional events and online content for people affected by BFRBs and their families, as well as educators, physicians, psychotherapists, and cosmetologists who may be among the first to notice a problem.

For further information contact:

The TLC Foundation for Body-Focused Repetitive Behaviors
716 Soquel Ave., Suite A, Santa Cruz, CA 95062
Phone: 831-457-1004
Email: info@bfrb.org
Website: www.bfrb.org