



How does dialysis affect my skin?

Many people on dialysis have skin changes. The skin may seem more fragile—it may bruise or even tear easily. Dry, itching, or cracking skin is common.

Some skin problems can be small. Others can make you feel bad about yourself or even cause you to not want to be seen by others. The good news is, many skin problems *can* be helped.



Why do I bruise more easily?

You may bruise easily if your dose of blood thinner (heparin) is too high. Or, easy bruising can occur if your blood level of platelets—clotting cells—is too low. With too few platelets, you might also have bleeding gums. Some drugs, like prednisone or coumadin, can increase bruising.

Why does my skin itch all the time?

Itching has many causes, so you will need to be a detective. Often, itching is caused by high blood levels of phosphorus. In your body, extra phosphorus can bind with calcium

to form sharp, itchy crystals. Taking your phosphate binders with food can help.

Other causes of itching include not enough dialysis, or dry skin. Long, hot baths that strip skin oils and alcohol-based products may dry the skin as well.

Why do I itch only at dialysis?

If you only itch *on* dialysis, an allergy may be the cause. One type of heparin (e.g., pork) might make you itch, while another does not. Or bleach used to clean the chair may be to blame. Try putting a towel on the chair, or alert the dialysis staff.

Why is my skin so fragile?

Skin that rips at the slightest bump, with purple or brown, itchy blisters can be a sign of a skin disease called “porphyria” (por-feer’-ee-a). This problem can be treated by a skin specialist.

Why is my hair falling out?

Hair is made of protein. If you become malnourished, a few months later your hair may break more easily and fall out. Eating enough good protein will help, but it takes a couple of months to see a change. Ask your dietitian about good protein sources.

Hair loss can also be caused by zinc deficiency, thyroid problems, drug reactions, and other problems. Some patients have had hair loss when the unit changes the type of dialyzer (kidney) used. Talk with your doctor about this, or ask for a referral to a skin doctor.

How can I treat my skin and hair problems?

Problem	How can I prevent it?	What should I ask?
Every time I bump into something, I get a big bruise.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure you know how much heparin you should get, to be sure you receive the right dose. • Ask your doctor about your platelet count or coumadin level (called InR) if you are on coumadin. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think my heparin dose is causing my easy bruising? • Is my platelet level (or InR) what it should be?
This itching is driving me crazy!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to figure out what is causing the itching. Is it better at some times than others? What helps or makes it worse? Does your skin look normal, or different? • Try a few over-the-counter lotions to see if one works for you. Some patients find that coconut oil is soothing. • Ask your doctor about lotions that might help. • Ask your doctor if an antihistamine would help. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you suggest some things I could try to help stop the itching? • Are there any prescription lotions that you think would help? • Do you have samples I could try, so I can find one that works before I have to pay for it?
I feel too ugly to go out. My skin is cracked and blistered.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk to your doctor as soon as you notice a skin problem that affects how you feel about yourself. • Ask for a referral to a skin doctor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don't think my skin problem is normal, even for dialysis patients. Can you write me a referral to a skin doctor?
What can I do while I wait for my hair to grow back in?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treat your hair gently—avoid harsh perms or colors. • Don't use tight rubber bands. • Ask a stylist for tips to hide thinning hair. • Be sure to eat the right amount of protein—talk to your dietitian. • Try to figure out what is causing the problem for you. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could you please check my thyroid levels? • What is my protein (albumin) level? (It should be at least 4.0 g/dL.)

