

Topical Steroid Withdrawal

Notes for Doctors

Topical Steroid Withdrawal (TSW), also known as Topical Steroid Addiction (TSA) and Red Skin Syndrome, is a debilitating condition that can arise from the use of topical steroid creams to treat a skin problem such as eczema. For further reading, please research The International Topical Steroid Addiction Network which is a nonprofit charity formed to raise awareness about a condition called Red Skin Syndrome, also known as Topical Steroid Addiction or Topical Steroid Withdrawal Syndrome. <https://www.itsan.org/>

This is preventable. Please watch this documentary



<https://youtu.be/RMbtf3C8BZk>

Further reading

[Topical Steroid Withdrawal in Atopic dermatitis
https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4207549/](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4207549/)

The TSW debate: Review the research and decide for yourself
<https://www.eczemalife.com/blogs/tsw/tsw-research>

TSW Facts

- Withdrawal can take anything from months to years and in some cases 4-5 years
- It isn't easy to predict the length of time it takes to heal, it just takes time.
- NMT is moisture withdrawal. Some people do this as well as withdrawing steroids. Medical advice should be explored before doing this.
- Treatments for TSW are not widely available and little research has been done into what works. But the following things may help
 - Epsom Salt baths
 - Regular exercise to promote sweating and raise the heart rate and body temperature, if it is possible
 - Mindfulness can help people deal with the pain, loss of self, helplessness. This will pass, they will heal, but a positive attitude can help speed up healing.
 - Ask if they help – how is their mental health? Many people feel extreme anxiety, desperation and suicidal thoughts
 - Social media can be very supportive. There are many people sharing their tips and experiences on Facebook and Instagram. This could help the patient feel less alone and reach out for support.
 - Sleep –rest aids healing... Suggest they use fans and cool packs to help cool the body.
 - Natural loose clothing is more comfortable.
 - There is currently no research being done into length of time to recover, symptoms and what helps. Ask them to Record symptoms daily and take photographs so you can track progress

TSW Symptoms

When someone who is addicted to Topical Steroids stops using them the following symptoms can cover the whole body within days of last application

- Oozing, weeping skin
- Skin that splits, cuts and sores
- Leathery skin that thickens
- Flares which cycle through burnt, swollen and red, through to dry, crusty and tight and then excessive flaking of whole areas with lots of skin flaking off.
- Sleeplessness, fatigue, exhaustion
- Sweating, extreme coldness and an inability to regulate temperature
- Skin cannot sweat
- Infections, eczema herpeticum can spread on TSW skin. Seek medical support if this happens

Topical steroids should only be used short term but with no other options available patients are using this topical drug for years. The result is red skin syndrome or topical steroid addiction. If you are treating patients with eczema, psoriasis and atopic dermatitis please make sure you are aware of TSW and the implications for the patient

Medical views on TSW

I have certainly seen Topical Steroid Withdrawal Syndrome, now multiple times. Generally, I find that these patients tend to have more widespread involvement on their body, but almost always have face and neck involved. Unlike eczema, it tends to be more red and flushing or blushing in appearance, although many patients will also have eczematous and scaly lesions at the same time.

Peter Lio, MD, Dermatologist and Partner at Medical Dermatology Associates of Chicago, US

Steroid addiction is a more subtle and more insidious type of side reaction. It is common but is not high in medical consciousness because it frequently goes unrecognized. Hence, it is underreported and not well characterized. Because it develops in stages, often slowly, both the physician and the patient may fail to incriminate the steroid.

Albert M. Kligman, MD, PhD, US, (Albert died 2010)

A dermatologist in California who named the illness 'red skin syndrome says patients in the US — including some from the UK benefit from deciding to come off steroid creams. ... that one in eight adults diagnosed with eczema may, in fact, have TSW.

Dr Marvin Rappaport, US

Though the topic of topical steroid addiction (TSA) is troublesome for physicians, we should not postpone facing it. It is not a temporary tide, TSA is real. Please search articles in PubMed. At the minimum, warning of TSA as a side-effect of topical steroids must be added in the guidelines of all areas of atopic dermatitis treatment.

Mototsugu Fukaya MD, JDA, Tsurumai Kouen Clinic, Japan

Also blogs about TSA and TSW

<http://mototsugufukaya.blogspot.com/>

A petition for change, signed by many patients who feel they are going through TSW:

<https://www.change.org/p/secretary-for-health-matt-hancock-u-k-dermatologist-recognise-and-treat-topical-steroid-addiction-red-skin-syndrome>

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