

Hidradenitis suppurativa

What is hidradenitis suppurativa?

Hidradenitis suppurativa is a condition affecting apocrine sweat glands that are located mostly under the arms and in the groin and genital area. These glands become blocked and inflamed, and then swollen and painful.

What causes hidradenitis suppurativa?

The cause of hidradenitis suppurativa is unknown. However, there does seem to be a genetic component in some cases. Bacteria seem to play some role which is why antibiotics may be used in treatment. However, bacteria are not the primary cause of the condition.

What does hidradenitis suppurativa look like?

Hidradenitis suppurativa usually starts with blockage of the apocrine or sweat glands. These blockages form comedones or blackheads. Inflammation can then develop, leading to redness and swelling. Advanced disease can lead to severe and disfiguring scarring.

What other problems can occur with hidradenitis suppurativa?

Pain associated with this condition can be severe and interfere with everyday activities. Secondary infections can occur which may be serious. The scarring can cause narrowing of the anus, rectum or urethra and lead to difficulty in passing stool or urine.

How is hidradenitis suppurativa diagnosed?

The diagnosis is usually made by a dermatologist. Biopsies and other tests are not required in most cases.

How is hidradenitis suppurativa treated?

The condition is very difficult to treat and no one treatment has been shown to be universally successful.

Affected persons need to be supervised by a dermatologist with treatment tailored to their individual needs.

Treatments include antibiotics and antibiotic combinations even if there is no evidence of secondary infection. Anti-androgens in both men and women can be useful, either on their own or in combination with antibiotics. Anti-inflammatory agents including oral corticosteroids and immunosuppressive agents such as dapsone, azathioprine, cyclophosphamide and methotrexate can be useful.

Newer biological agents are currently being trialled, and infliximab and adalimumab seem to be showing promise. There are a number of other treatments that have been tried including retinoids (vitamin A-like drugs), photodynamic therapy and laser treatment.

Very severe cases often require surgery. The surgery can be extensive and is ideally carried out by a plastic surgeon who is familiar and experienced with this condition.

What is the likely outcome of hidradenitis suppurativa?

The condition is not curable but is generally controllable with one or more of the above treatments.

Treatment and control of the inflammation is important to minimise the condition progressing and scarring.

Weight gain and smoking worsen the condition and should be avoided. Hidradenitis suppurativa is generally most active during teenage years and young adulthood. It often, but not always, improves as the person gets older.