

Dermatitis herpetiformis

What is dermatitis herpetiformis?

Dermatitis herpetiformis is an uncommon itchy skin condition which can occur at any age. It is a specific skin change seen in coeliac disease. Most people with dermatitis herpetiformis also have the more common bowel problems associated with coeliac disease known as gluten enteropathy. If the bowel is involved, individuals often have symptoms such as bloating, cramping or diarrhoea.

What causes dermatitis herpetiformis?

Most people with dermatitis herpetiformis have coeliac disease which is an autoimmune condition causing gluten intolerance. The body's immune system reacts against a certain component of gluten in the diet, causing inflammation of the skin.

What does dermatitis herpetiformis look like?

Itchy pink-red bumps or tiny blisters appear often symmetrically on the outer aspects of elbows, knees, buttocks, scalp or shoulders. The blisters may not be obvious to see, as they are often scratched off. Dermatitis herpetiformis can be mistaken for eczema or scabies.

How is dermatitis herpetiformis diagnosed?

A skin biopsy is needed to confirm the diagnosis. Blood tests are often performed to identify specific autoimmune markers for coeliac disease. Sometimes individuals may be referred to a gastroenterologist for further tests such as an endoscopy, where a biopsy of the small bowel is taken.

How is dermatitis herpetiformis treated?

A strict gluten-free diet is strongly advised. This may be the only treatment that is required. There are many online resources available listing foods which contain gluten. Formal advice from a dietician can also be provided.

Other treatments include the medication dapsone, though this requires regular blood test monitoring. Cortisone-based anti-inflammatory creams can be used but are only temporarily soothing.