

Notalgia paraesthetica

What is notalgia paraesthetica?

Notalgia paraesthetica is a disorder where an often intense localised itch occurs without a rash on the mid to upper back between the shoulder blades. It is thought to be due to sensory nerve irritation rather than a primary skin condition. It tends to run a chronic course. There is currently no cure but there are treatments that can help control the itch.

What causes notalgia paraesthetica?

Notalgia paraesthetica is due to injury to the nerves that supply the skin of the affected area. These nerves originate in the spinal cord of the upper back and then run a long course through the thick back muscles before reaching the skin. The nerves may be injured anywhere along this path.

In the spine, nerve injury may be due to chronic degenerative changes or an acute back injury. In the muscles, nerve injury may be due to muscle inflammation or disease. In the skin, nerve injury may be due to sunburn or shingles.

What does notalgia paraesthetica look like?

The first sign of notalgia paraesthetica is itch. This is typically localised to an area of skin just between or below the shoulder blade on either side of the back. Some people will also experience burning pain, tenderness and increased sensitivity of the skin in that area. The changes seen on the skin are usually the result of repeated scratching and rubbing. This may lead to the skin in the area becoming darker in colour.

How is notalgia paraesthetica diagnosed?

The diagnosis is usually made by a dermatologist and is based on history of an episodic intense itch plus clinical examination. If the history or physical examination indicates the possibility of a spinal or muscular problem further investigation may be needed.

How is notalgia paraesthetica treated?

Currently there is no cure for notalgia paraesthetica. However, many treatments are available to help reduce the itch. Reassurance that there is no major medical problem is important.

Topical treatments (creams) are used to directly reduce inflammation or “trick the nerves” into not sending the message of itch/pain to the brain. Examples of topical treatments include:
Cooling creams (containing menthol and/or phenol and/or camphor)
Cold packs applied to the irritable area when it is symptomatic can be helpful
Capsaicin cream
Local anaesthetic creams

Other compounded creams (containing doxepin, amitriptyline and ketamine)

Because of the intermittent nature of symptoms, notalgia paraesthetica is mostly managed with the use of topical preparations. If the symptoms are more persistent or troublesome additional treatments may be tried.

Oral treatments (tablets) reduce the sensation of nerve irritation. Examples of oral treatments include:

Doxepin

Amitriptyline

Gabapentin or pregabalin

Injectable treatments

Botulinum toxin

Paravertebral local anaesthetic block

Peripheral nerve field stimulation

Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation

Subcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation

Acupuncture

Back support

Enhancing your back support may also be helpful and your doctor may suggest:

An ergonomic assessment

Physiotherapy

What is the likely outcome of notalgia paraesthetica?

Notalgia paraesthetica typically runs a chronic course. In most people the itch is mild, but it can be quite debilitating in others.