



Psoriasis: Mild, moderate, severe

What to do? Whom should you see?

By Dr. Andrei Metelitsa and Dr. Paul Kuzel

The total impact of psoriasis in Canada is staggering. Although estimates vary, it is thought to affect over one million Canadians. Further, it represents a total economic burden to Canadian society of up to \$1.7 billion annually. Researchers have shown that, if left untreated, patients with moderate to severe psoriasis suffer as serious an impact on their overall quality of life and psychological well-being as do patients with other serious medical conditions including cancer.

What is plaque psoriasis?

Plaque psoriasis (or *psoriasis vulgaris*) is a common, chronic autoimmune disorder of the skin. Although the exact cause is still unknown, it is thought that psoriasis differs from most other autoimmune diseases in that it does not result from the

immune system attacking and destroying one's own cells. Rather, in psoriasis our immune system may in fact stimulate the *overgrowth* of cells in the epidermis (the outermost layer of the skin), resulting in characteristic skin lesions consisting of thick, red patches usually covered with silvery-white scale. Although psoriasis can occur anywhere, it is most commonly found on the scalp, elbows, knees, lower back, genitals, soles of the feet and palms of the hands.

Assessing the severity of your psoriasis

Dermatologists typically group psoriasis into one of three categories based on severity: mild, moderate or severe. An accurate severity assessment can help not only in determining an appropriate course of treatment, but also in monitoring disease progression and treatment

effectiveness. It is important to note that assessments should ideally be completed prior to the initiation of your treatment and at subsequent follow-up visits. A simple rule of thumb when determining what proportion of total body surface area (BSA) is affected by psoriasis is that one per cent of BSA is roughly equal to an area of skin the size of your palm.

While the proportion of BSA affected by your psoriasis has traditionally been used to gauge the level of severity, many dermatologists now advocate for the use of a combination of factors including the level of severity of each lesion, observed or expected response to treatment, and impact on quality of life (QoL). Some tools have been developed to score a patient's psoriasis severity, such as the Psoriasis Area and Severity Index (PASI) (see sidebar on page 4).

What's your score?

Your dermatologist can determine your **Psoriasis Area and Severity Index (PASI)**, or online calculators are available if you want to see for yourself. The tool has two major steps: first, it calculates how much of your body surface area (BSA) is covered with lesions; then, it assesses the severity of lesions (scaling, thickness and redness).



Here's how dermatologists classify the three degrees of psoriasis severity, described both in terms of BSA and other criteria.

Mild

Psoriasis is diagnosed as mild if it involves less than three per cent of your total BSA and generally involves isolated patches on limbs and scalp. Alternatively, psoriasis can be considered mild if adequate control is achieved using a topical therapy. Mild psoriasis should have no more than a minimal impact on a patient's QoL.

Moderate

With moderate disease, between three and 10 per cent of the patient's total BSA is affected by psoriasis. Usually more visible, it can appear on limbs, torso and scalp. Using criteria other than BSA, psoriasis is moderate if the disease has a significant impact on your QoL or if adequate control cannot be achieved using a standard topical treatment.

psoriasis is effectively managed by family doctors, our recommendation for most patients with psoriasis is that you be referred to a dermatologist. It is more important now, since newly discovered associations have been made between psoriasis and the risk of developing other, potentially serious medical conditions, and also because of the increase in the variety of treatments.

2. Prevent flares

Besides seeking medical advice and instituting an appropriate treatment regimen, patients can dramatically improve disease control by avoiding potential triggers. In genetically susceptible individuals, these factors may trigger a flare:

- psychological stress
- infections (particularly streptococcal infections)
- several types of medications (ask your dermatologist)



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Severe

Psoriasis affecting 10 per cent or more of a patient's BSA is classified as severe. Also, larger patches, psoriasis on the face, palms or soles can be diagnosed as severe. Alternatively, it is considered severe if it is inadequately controlled by standard topical therapy and results in severe impairment of a patient's QoL.

You have psoriasis: Now what?

1. See a dermatologist

Although in many cases mild

- alcohol consumption
- smoking
- sunburn
- mechanical irritation (caused by itching or scratching, for example)

Obesity has also been associated with psoriasis, although it is unclear whether being obese predisposes patients to developing psoriasis, or vice versa. Finally, a simple but effective way to help prevent flares of psoriasis is to moisturize—and moisturize some more!

Do your homework

Below are some websites with credible information and useful resources:

National Psoriasis Foundation (www.psoriasis.org) is a large, U.S.-based website.


PsoMe (www.psome.org) is an excellent website for children suffering with psoriasis and their families.

Canadian Association of Psoriasis Patients (www.psoriasiscommunity.ca) features information specifically tailored to Canadians living with psoriasis.

Canadian Dermatology Association (www.dermatology.ca) features information about psoriasis and other skin conditions, written by Canadian dermatologists.

3. Educate yourself

Increasing your knowledge ultimately enables you to be an active participant in your health care. You can do this by tracking your triggers to prevent flare-ups, meeting other psoriasis patients and keeping up with the latest news about psoriasis.

If you believe you have psoriasis, ask your doctor to send you to see a dermatologist. Working with your medical team, you can learn to live with psoriasis, manage your symptoms and seek out the best treatment for you and your lifestyle. 

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