

PITYRIASIS ROSEA

Pityriasis rosea (pit-ih-RYE-uh-sis rose-EE-uh) is a little recognized, but surprisingly common, skin rash that strikes between the ages of 10 to 35 years. It is particularly common in late teens and early 20s and therefore often seen at Emory University Student Health Services.

Pityriasis rosea usually presents with a single, large (1-2 inch) round or oval patch, often on the chest/back or shoulder area. The patch is scaly, flat and frequently is mistaken for a fungal “ringworm,” even by doctors. This patch is called the “herald patch,” because it foretells the coming of the rest of the rash, which usually follows in one to two weeks. The patient then breaks out in lots of smaller (1/2 to 1 inch or so), oval, flat, scaly patches, mostly on the trunk and upper arms and legs. Often, the patches mirror the skin fold lines of the body, so the pattern can look like a “Christmas tree” on the back. The patches can be itchy (usually not severely) but not usually painful. Rarely, patients also note fatigue and mild flu-like symptoms in the early going. The rash usually lasts 6-12 weeks and then goes away without treatment (although sometimes it can last longer).



The cause of pityriasis rosea is unknown, but it is quite possibly due to a virus. Frankly, since the rash never makes anyone ill, doesn't kill anyone and clears on its own, it is unlikely that scientists will do the research to find a cause. If indeed it is due to a virus, it doesn't seem to spread in the conventional viral person-to-person manner. We don't see outbreaks in families or on a residence hall floor. It just occurs, stays a while and goes away. Go figure!

Treatment is usually minimal (lotions or mild anti-histamine pills for itching) since the symptoms are usually minimal. Frequently, the healthcare provider's most difficult task is trying to convince the patient that nothing serious is wrong and that the rash will go away on its own!

For more information about pityriasis rosea, including [pictures](#) of the rash, check out the excellent American Academy of Dermatology web site at <http://www.aad.org/pamphlets/index.html> and click on pityriasis rosea.

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