

Menopause and gynecological conditions:

Lichen sclerosus

Vulvar lichen sclerosus (LS) is a chronic inflammatory dermatosis that primarily affects the genital labial, perineal and perianal areas. It is widely considered an immune-mediated condition. Although LS itself is not a premalignant disorder, women with genital LS have an increased risk of developing vulvar squamous cell carcinoma.

Symptoms

- Itching (**primary symptom**)
- Soreness/burning pain (consequence of erosion or fissures)
- Dysuria
- Superficial dyspareunia
 - Around 9% of those with LS will, though, be **asymptomatic**

Signs

- Sclerotic change – ‘white papules and plaques’
- Ecchymosis
- Fissuring
- Adhesion or ‘agglutination’ (typically involving fusion of the labia minora, sealing of clitoral hood and narrowing of the vaginal introitus, with rare obliteration)
- Loss of vulva architecture (‘plastic doll’ appearance)
- ‘Figure-of-eight’ involvement of the perineal and perianal skin, with possible extension to the buttocks or genitocrural folds
- The **vagina** and **cervix** are not involved

Differential diagnoses

- Lichen planus
- Lichen simplex chronicus
- Immunobullous disorders (e.g. mucous membrane pemphigoid)
- Plasma cell vulvitis
- Vulvar intraepithelial neoplasia (VIN)
- Squamous cell carcinoma (SCC)
- Warts
- Psoriasis

Management

- **First line:** 3-month application of high-potency topical steroids (clobetasol propionate)
- **Second-line:** topical calcineurin inhibitors and imiquimod
- Education and support, as LS may lead to scarring and sexual problems
- Surgery for treatment of complications
- Lifelong monitoring is required
- Evidence is insufficient to recommend stem cell therapies, platelet-rich plasma or laser treatments

Diagnosis should be based on clinical examination; biopsy is reserved for selected cases and should not be performed routinely.

Topical sex hormones (estrogen, testosterone or progesterone) are not recommended in the management of adult female genital lichen sclerosus.

Further information

Royal College of Physicians of Ireland (2025). Clinical update. Adult vulval lichen sclerosus <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/acute-hospitals-division/woman-infants/clinical-guidelines/>