Ringworm

If your child has a scaly round patch on the side of his scalp or elsewhere on his skin, and he seems to be losing hair in the same area of the scalp, the problem may be a contagious infection known as ringworm or tinea. This disorder is caused not by worms but by a fungus. It’s called ringworm because the infections tend to form round or oval spots that, as they grow, become smooth in the center but keep an active red scaly border.

Signs and Symptoms

The first signs of infection on the body are red, scaly patches. They may not look like rings until they’ve grown to half an inch in diameter, and they generally stop growing at about 1 inch. Your child may have just one patch or several. These lesions may be mildly itchy and uncomfortable.

Scalp ringworm starts the same way the body variety does, but as the rings grow, your child may lose some hair in the infected area. Certain types of scalp ringworm produce less obvious rings and are easily confused with dandruff or cradle cap. Cradle cap, however, occurs only during infancy. If your child’s scalp is continually scaly and he’s over a year old, you should suspect ringworm and notify your pediatrician.

Treatment

Ringworm on the Body

A single ringworm patch on the body can be treated with an over-the-counter cream. The most frequently used ones are tolnaftate, miconazole, and clotrimazole. A small amount is applied two or three times a day for at least a week, during which time some clearing should begin. If there are any patches on the scalp or more than one on the body, or if the rash is getting worse while being treated, check with your pediatrician. She will prescribe a stronger medication.

Ringworm on the Scalp

This type of ringworm cannot be treated with over-the-counter cream. Your pediatrician needs to prescribe an oral antifungal preparation. Your child will have to take the medicine for, on average, 6-12 weeks to clear the infection.

You also need to wash your child’s scalp with selenium sulfide 2.5% shampoo for the next 8 weeks. Apply to the scalp, leave on for at least 5 minutes, then rinse. Do this three times weekly.

If there’s any possibility that others in the family have caught the infection, they also should use this shampoo and be examined for possible signs of infection.

Household members should not share hats, combs, brushes, curling irons, hair clips, barrettes and towels.

Look for scaling, itchy, hairless areas on your dogs and cats, and have them treated right away.

Adapted from www.kidshealth.org and www.healthychildren.org