

WHAT IS HABIT REVERSAL THERAPY?

Introduction

Some skin conditions, such as eczema, can cause the skin to become dry. Dry skin, acute eczema flares and other skin conditions such as urticaria are often itchy and this can understandably lead to behaviours such as scratching/ rubbing and/or picking as ways to try and cope. There are also conditions that do not involve itch that, for various reasons, involve these same behaviours. Eventually the behaviours can become habits.

The Problem: Habits and skin damage

The first few times a person uses a behaviour like scratching it is most often a *conscious reaction*. However, after repeating this behaviour over time, the response can become habitual and hence unconscious. By this point the person therefore has little control over the behaviour that is creating skin damage and stopping skin healing. This problem continues even with the use of prescribed creams. Figure 1 explains the vicious itch-scratch cycle in more detail.

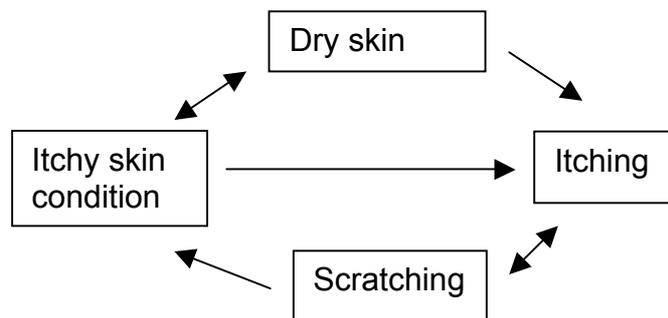


Figure 1: Vicious itch-scratch cycle

Dry skin or a skin condition such as active eczema can lead to the experience of itching. This leads to a behaviour such as scratching. When one scratches this releases chemicals in the skin that cause increased itchiness. Scratching also damages the skin and can inhibit healing, causing the skin condition to appear worse. The result is a vicious cycle of itching, scratching and damaged skin. Eventually, no matter if the behaviour is scratching or something else, it becomes driven at least mainly by habit instead of by itch.

The Solution: Habit reversal therapy for healing

Habit reversal therapy is a treatment programme that offers a solution to the problem of the habit that has developed. It aims to reduce the frequency of the habitual behaviour that has built up. This information sheet explains its evidence base, what the therapy consists of and the positive and negative elements of the treatment.

The evidence base

The treatment was developed in the 1980s by Dr Christopher Bridgett (Consultant Psychiatrist from the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, London) and Dr Peter Noren (Consultant Dermatologist, from Sweden) for people with atopic eczema. Research has shown the effectiveness of the therapy for those with eczema. It has been shown that habit reversal therapy in combination with topical skin treatment improves skin condition in patients with eczema significantly more than topical treatment alone. The studies found that improved skin was associated with reduced scratching. They called their programme the “Combined Approach” to atopic skin disease. More recently, habit reversal therapy has been shown to be effective for people who pick their skin, such as those with acne excoriee and skin pickers (Shah & Bewley, 2014).

What is habit reversal therapy? / Key concepts

Habit reversal therapy is a behavioural therapy. The approach is seen as complementary rather than an alternative to dermatological treatment. The main aspect of the therapy is behaviour modification to eliminate the damage caused to the skin by the habit being targeted.

How it does it work?

The therapy includes 2 phases. The first is called awareness training and the second is behaviour modification.

Awareness training: This aims to increase awareness via monitoring of how often you scratch/ pick and the details such as what times and situations you most frequently scratch/ pick. This also helps to create discipline and introduce consistency.

Behaviour modification: This involves exploring, forming and engaging with new strategies as an alternative response to scratching/ picking. When treating eczema for example, there are three levels of treatment if you follow the Combined Approach by Bridgett and Noren. These include: using emollients and creams to hydrate the dry skin, using steroids (if prescribed) to reduce the itchiness of acute eczema flares and habit reversal therapy to reduce habitual scratching. The Combined Approach therefore emphasises the importance of adherence to prescribed creams and medications which is optimised in their treatment in addition to using habit reversal.

Certain situational and emotional triggers can also increase the likelihood of scratching such as stress. Triggers are different from individual to individual. Healing can only occur if scratching stops. Some therapists integrate the therapy with tackling the triggers. Your programme might suggest that you minimise contact with situations in which you engage with the habit the most. However, it is understood that not all situations can be eliminated from your life. This is why you are likely to need to spend some time tackling your individual triggers.

Pros and cons

Pros

- The therapy can be conducted in different formats, face-to-face: individually or within a group setting. Self-help resources are also available.
- It is a short-term therapy, a minimum of 4 sessions.
- The therapy is simple to understand and is a very pragmatic approach to the problem.
- Research has shown that it can be effective for people who scratch and/or pick their skin.

Cons

- The therapy requires a great deal of motivation and consistency. To benefit from the therapy you need to be motivated to change/ committed to the process of therapy. Therapists can help you get to this stage and discuss your motivation.
- It is not suitable for those who pick for reasons other than habit. Other reasons might include emotionally picking the skin or picking focused at reasons such as trying to change the way your skin looks. Again, it is only for those for whom their scratching/picking has become a habit.

Next steps

If you think you would benefit from habit reversal therapy then contact your GP, dermatologist or nurse specialist who may refer you to an appropriate person (e.g. a psychologist or someone trained in the therapy). For more information on habit reversal for atopic eczema visit www.atopicskindisease.com.

Habit reversal therapy. By Dr Reena Shah, Chartered Clinical Psychologist, Specialist in dermatology & Dr Mark Turner, Highly Specialist Clinical Psychologist. (Adapted from Bridgett and Noren: Live without eczema therapy booklet).