

Cradle cap

Cradle cap is a skin condition that affects babies. It causes yellowed crusts on the scalp. It is commonly present in the first three months of life, and is rare after the age of one year. It is a form of dermatitis, which causes inflammation of sebaceous glands in the skin (seborrhoeic dermatitis). These glands help waterproof the skin by making a slightly greasy substance called sebum. Seborrhoeic dermatitis happens when the glands make too much sebum, which then traps shed skin flakes. Cradle cap usually clears by itself after a few months but many parents prefer to remove it because they do not like the look of it. If scaly patches appear on the face or other parts of the body, this is not cradle cap and needs to be checked by your doctor. Cradle cap is not contagious and it is not caused by poor hygiene or bad parenting.

Signs

The signs of cradle cap include:

- Reddening of the skin
- Greasiness
- Scales or flakes on the scalp
- Yellow crusts.

Causes of cradle cap

Sebaceous glands in the scalp make sebum, which oils and waterproofs the skin. It is thought that some babies have high levels of maternal hormones in their bodies for several weeks or months following birth, and these hormones act on the glands, making more sebum. Research has found that babies who get cradle cap and other forms of dermatitis often have blood relatives with allergic conditions such as eczema and asthma.

Home treatment

Mild cradle cap usually gets better without treatment after a few weeks. The following may help:

- Loosen the crusts by massaging the scalp with mineral oil (like baby oil) at night, then wash the hair with a baby shampoo the next morning, gently lifting the crusts off with a soft brush (a soft toothbrush can be good for this). Try this each day until your baby's scalp looks clearer.
- Use a mild antidandruff shampoo if the other treatment is not working – be careful, these shampoos can irritate a baby's eyes more than shampoos made for babies.

The cradle cap can come back, even when treated properly, because the glands still go on making too much sebum for several weeks.

Infection and cradle cap

Sometimes the skin under the crusts of cradle cap can become infected. The skin becomes redder and small blisters appear, and then pop and weep. This is caused by the same germs that cause impetigo ('school sores'). If this infection spreads, or your baby becomes unwell, make sure that you have your baby checked by a doctor. Your baby may need antibiotics to get rid of the infection. Unlike cradle cap, impetigo is highly contagious.

Seek medical advice

If your baby's cradle cap isn't improving, or seems to be spreading to other areas of the body (including the face and body), it is important to seek medical help.

Ongoing skin problems

A baby who develops cradle cap may have other types of seborrhoeic dermatitis when older, including persistent dandruff. Adolescence can be a peak time for seborrhoeic dermatitis because of increased production of sex hormones. Some people also have a type of yeast, known as *pitrosporum*, which can make the dermatitis worse. Antifungal treatments may help.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local chemist
- Maternal and Child Health nurse.

Things to remember

- Cradle cap is a form of dermatitis that affects some babies in their first few months of life.
- Signs include greasy, yellow crusts on the scalp.
- Massage of the scalp at night with a mineral oil, followed by washing the hair and scalp next morning, lifting the crusts with a soft brush, may help.

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Better Health Channel

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