Tendergroin District

Jock itch isn't just for bullies anymore

March 1, 2000 By Greg Lugliani

Nurse Me Tender, Nurse Me Sweet:

And I mean tender—my groin's all red, itchy and nasty. I've ruled out crabs (no action in weeks!) and blame my New Year's resolve to join a gym and get fit. So, Mama, whatchya got up your immaculate sleeve for some good ol' fashioned jock itch?

—No Fakin' the Flakin'

Dear Flakin':
By now I guess it's no secret that Nurse does adore hearing from her readers about their genitalia, so thank you so much, m'dear, for writing me with your pubic problem. But before even asking you figuratively to drop your drawers for my examination, my first command to you is to learn the Latin for your affliction. After all, isn't tinea cruris ever so much more elegant and poetic than jock itch? Besides, you don't have to be an athlete, or even an athletic supporter, to suffer the indignities and indispositions created by the tiny pesties that cause the condition—a type of fungi called dermatophytes. While guys who sweat heavily and those who are overweight are most often tinea's victims, no man is a fungus-free island. Nor, I assure you, is woman. Though widely regarded as the realm of the testosterone-bearer, jock itch can also call the crotch of the fair sex home.

Tinea cruris is a close cousin of athlete's foot (tinea pedis—see Nurse, August 1999), fungal infections of the body (tinea corporis) and nails (tinea uguium), ringworm (tinea capitis) and other maddening moldy maladies—except it does its dirty work, as you're now witnessing firsthand, around the inner thighs. You'll know it by its raised, scaly, red and often circular pattern—and, of course, by the itch. Vexing as it is, tinea almost mercifully spares the naughty bits (penis, scrotum and vagina), but beware your bum: Jock itch is known to migrate merrily to the butthole, resulting in an unsettlingly uncomfortable episode of pruritus ani, the mellifluous Latin name for the intractable anal itching that's guaranteed to keep you—sorry, I can't resist—on the edge of your seat.

Contagiousness is, in fact, perhaps tinea's quaintest characteristic. The frolicsome fungi can be passed from one person to another by direct contact or via cloth- ing, towels, bedding, combs or other items that have somehow picked them up (a brisk washing of those items will rinse the buggers away). It's obvious, but bears saying that the surfaces of communal showers, steamrooms and saunas are fungal spore hatcheries, so be sure to slip into a pair of rubber sandals before joining the party in any wet area—especially as you can give yourself jock itch by picking your athlete's foot– ridden toes and then groping around your groin. Pets, particularly cats, also can ferry fungi, so now might be a good time to break Tabby's habit of sharing your pillow with you, especially if she's scratched herself bald in patches—a telltale sign of tinea.

Though possibly peskier in AIDSy people, the good news about jock itch is that a veritable smorgasbord of over-the-counter antifungal sprays, creams and powders grace the shelves of corner stores near you. The most effective are those containing miconazole (Micatin). Other common tinea-tacklers include clotrimazole (Desenex, Cruex), tolnaftate (Aftate, Tinactin) and terbinafine (Lamisil). Not into drugs? Black walnut extract, available at health food emporia, is a fine fungus-fighting alternative. Don't use any products indicated solely for athlete's foot as they may result in additional unwanted irritation due to your crotch's comparative delicacy. And don't go postal with the antifungals! Use products only as directed since overtreatment can turn on the tinea, as can washing between the legs too often with soap because fungi fairly flourish in its alkalinity. If the rash and itch refuse to abate, check with your doctor again: You may have another kind of genital affliction that needs different therapy.

With jock itch as with everything else, prevention is your best friend. To keep this irksome intruder away from your home-entertainment center, trade your flesh-hugging synthetics (if you dare) for loose-fitting cotton to facilitate evaporation and give your skin some breathing room. Dry yourself thoroughly after bathing. At the risk of sounding like your mother, change your underwear daily. If you don't wear underwear—Good Lord, if you're hit by a bus, what will they say in the ER?—change your jeans and wash them often. Finally, while Mr. Right's soiled jockstrap may be a fetish object to you, for tinea-causing fungi it's purely public transportation, so handle with care. With this said, I'll scratch 'n' sniff you later, dearies.

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