



St John's Institute of Dermatology

Habit reversal to reduce scratching and promote skin healing

This leaflet explains how to use the behavioural therapy called habit reversal. This is the second of two leaflets that offer support on how to reduce habitual scratching. This leaflet should be used after you have monitored your scratching behaviour for one week with the leaflet 'Scratch monitoring' - please ask for a copy if you have not already.

If you have any further questions, please speak to the doctor, nurse or psychologist caring for you.

What is habit reversal?

Habit reversal is a behavioural therapy to reduce scratching as much as possible and give damaged skin time to heal.

How does it work?

Habit reversal should be used after you have monitored your scratching behaviour for one week. Now follow the guidance below and continue to follow your skin care plan.

Habit Reversal

1. Instead of scratching, clench your fists for 30 seconds:



2. If after 30 seconds there is still an itch, gently pinch or press a nail into that area and start at one again. If there is no itch after fist clenching, there is no need to pinch or press.
3. Then stay busy by engaging with an everyday activity.

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During habit reversal, you can eliminate or reduce the time you spend in the situations in which you scratch the most (based on what you discovered from your use of the scratch monitoring leaflet). It usually helps to write down your plan in the boxes below:

The situations I can eliminate are:

The situations I can reduce time spent scratching are:

Instead I can stay more occupied with activities such as:

Plus more use of emollient to protect against skin dryness and flaring, especially if you have to enter a situation in which you know you scratch in

As you improve at using habit reversal, you will feel rewarded by fewer scratch counts. For this reason it is important to continue monitoring your scratching. At the end of each day, enter the date and the total number of scratches for that day in the table below, and then set the counter back to zero for the next day.

Day/ Date							
Total number of scratches							

Day/ Date							
Total number of scratches							

You can compare your scratch monitoring in the table above with your first week of scratch monitoring, to observe your progress in reducing your scratching episodes.

Continuing habit reversal to promote skin healing

While you also follow your skin care plan, continuing habit reversal will improve skin healing over several weeks. Keep going with the table below.

Day/ Date							
Total number of scratches							

Day/ Date							
Total number of scratches							

Day/ Date							
Total number of scratches							

Day/ Date							
Total number of scratches							

It can help to reflect on your use of habit reversal in the box below:

What I will take forward from habit reversal and use as part of my skin care plan:

Useful sources of information

Atopic Skin Disease

This organisation provides information about habit reversal plus topical treatments.

w: www.atopicskindisease.com

The National Eczema Society

This organisation is an excellent source of information for people with eczema.

w: www.eczema.org

The British Association of Dermatologists

This organisation provides information on various skin conditions, self-help materials and support services.

w: www.skincare.org.uk

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about scratch monitoring, please speak to the doctor, nurse or psychologist caring for you.

Out of hours, please contact your GP or NHS 111.

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

t: 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

t: 020 7188 8801 (PALS) **e:** pals@gstt.nhs.uk

t: 020 7188 3514 (complaints) **e:** complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk

Language and accessible support services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch:

t: 020 7188 8815 **e:** languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk

NHS 111

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day.

t: 111

NHS Choices

Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.

w: www.nhs.uk

Get involved and have your say: become a member of the Trust

Members of Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust contribute to the organisation on a voluntary basis. We count on them for feedback, local knowledge and support. Membership is free and it is up to you how much you get involved. To find out more, and to become a member:

t: 0800 731 0319 **e:** members@gstt.nhs.uk **w:** www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership

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