

Rough, scaly patches of skin on their newborn's scalp can be alarming to new parents, but usually are nothing to worry about. Most likely, they're due to a harmless condition many babies develop called cradle cap.

## About Cradle Cap

Cradle cap is the common term for seborrheic dermatitis, or seborrhea, which is called [dandruff](#) in older kids and adults.

It's a relatively common condition in newborns and children as old as 3 and causes thick white or yellow scales on the scalp. Some kids just get scales in a small patch; others have scales all over their heads. Sometimes, cradle cap can even occur on the eyebrows, eyelids, ears, crease of the nose, back of the neck, diaper area, or armpits. In a few cases, such as in babies who have [eczema](#) or dry skin, cradle cap can cause cracked skin that itches and oozes a small amount of clear yellow drainage.

Cradle cap is not contagious and it isn't an indication of poor hygiene. Most of the time, it just goes away on its own. In severe or persistent cases, though, a doctor may recommend a medicated shampoo or lotion. Washing your baby's scalp daily with mild shampoo also can help to loosen and remove the scales caused by cradle cap.

Though it might look to be uncomfortable or irritating to the skin, cradle cap generally doesn't bother kids.

## Causes

The exact cause of cradle cap isn't known, although some researchers believe it's due to an overproduction of skin oil (sebum) in the oil glands and hair follicles. A type of yeast (fungus) called *malassezia* can grow in the sebum along with bacteria, and this may be another factor in the development of cradle cap.

Seborrhea happens most often in babies and teenagers. In both of these times in a person's life, hormone levels are high, which also might play a role in the condition.

Certain factors — like weather extremes, oily skin, problems with the immune system, stress, and other skin disorders — can make it more likely that a child will get cradle cap.

## Symptoms

Cradle cap looks different on every baby. It can be grouped together in bunches, or crops, or it can be spread far apart on the body. Affected areas will usually have one or more of these symptoms:

- thick plaques or crusts (especially on the scalp, but sometimes on the ears, eyelids, eyebrows, nose, neck, groin, or armpits)
- greasy or oily patches of skin, often covered with white or yellow scales
- skin flakes (dandruff)

In a very few cases, babies with cradle cap will have skin that is a little red or itchy, and some might even have hair loss, though the hair usually grows back after the cradle cap is gone.

## When to See a Doctor

In most cases, cradle cap will be easy to identify at home just by looking at it. However, call your child's doctor if:

- you are treating cradle cap for the first time
- your child has seborrhea in places where he or she doesn't have hair
- you've tried home treatments without success
- the rash gets worse or covers large parts of the body
- the rash is causing hair loss or becomes itchy
- the affected skin becomes firm and red, starts to drain fluid, or feels warm, which could be signs of an infection
- your child has a weakened immune system and develops seborrhea
- your child has seborrhea and is having trouble gaining weight

## Curing Cradle Cap

While most cases of cradle cap don't require any treatment, you may want to loosen and remove the scales on your baby's scalp. This usually can be done by gently massaging your baby's scalp with your fingers or a washcloth and washing your baby's hair once a day with mild baby shampoo while scales are present.

After the scales have disappeared, you can control the seborrhea by shampooing just twice a week. Brush your child's hair with a clean, soft brush before rinsing off the shampoo to loosen the scales.

If the scales don't loosen easily, consider rubbing a small amount of mineral oil (avoid using olive oil) onto your baby's scalp. Allow the oil to soak into the scales for a few minutes, and then brush and shampoo your baby's hair as usual. Be sure to wash the oil away each time — too much oil may cause scales to build up and could make cradle cap worse.

If regular shampooing doesn't help, ask your doctor about nonprescription medicated or dandruff shampoos. These shampoos contain ingredients such as salicylic acid, coal tar, zinc, selenium, and ketoconazole that can help treat dryness and flaking. Some stronger forms of these medicines do require a prescription.

If you use one of these medicated shampoos, rub a little shampoo into your child's scalp and let it soak in for at least 2 minutes. Then wash the shampoo out and repeat the process one more time. You might need to do this daily or twice weekly at first, but after the cradle cap is under control, you may only have to use medicated shampoos once a month.

For seborrhea on other parts of the body, or if your child has irritated skin, steroid creams like hydrocortisone can help. Make sure to ask your baby's doctor before using hydrocortisone.

Cradle cap may disappear for months at a time and then suddenly reappear, but by following the steps above, you should be able to control it.