

Henoch-Schönlein Purpura

Henoch-Schönlein purpura (HSP) is a condition most commonly causing a skin rash with arthritis. It results from inflammation of blood vessels (vasculitis). Other organs may also be involved, including the kidneys and gastrointestinal tract. The cause of HSP is unknown—it usually occurs after a cold. Most children with HSP recover completely, but it's important to watch for complications related to the kidneys and gastrointestinal system.

What is Henoch-Schönlein purpura?

Henoch-Schönlein purpura (HSP) is a vasculitis (inflammation of the blood vessels), usually involving the immune system. The most common symptom is a rash, mainly on the legs, buttocks, and abdomen. Arthritis (joint pain and swelling), abdominal pain, and other symptoms can occur as well. Another name for HSP is *anaphylactoid purpura*. (“Purpura” means a rash caused by bleeding under the skin.)

Most children with HSP recover without complications, although complete recovery may take several weeks. However, problems may result from vasculitis involving other organs, especially the kidneys and intestines. Some of these complications are serious, so your child should be watched closely while he or she is recovering.

What does it look like?

- Usually, the illness starts with an upper respiratory infection (cold). Other symptoms may occur suddenly or gradually.
- The main symptom is a *rash*:
 - The rash begins as pink spots that often look and feel like hives or welts. The bumps gradually change from red to purple to brown before they finally fade.
 - The rash usually appears on the lower half of the body, especially the legs, buttocks, and lower abdomen.
 - The rash usually appears in “crops,” which last 3 to 10 days. After clearing, the rash may reappear. It may take a few days to a few months between crops.
 - Swelling (edema) may occur in several areas of the body, including the buttocks, face, or hands and feet. Swelling of the scrotum (the sac containing the testicles), if it occurs, can be very painful.
- *Arthritis* (joint pain and swelling) occurs in most children with HSP:
 - Pain occurs mainly in the knees and elbows but usually clears up within a few days.
- Abdominal pain.


- Blood in the urine (*hematuria*). The urine usually appears brown, like cola, but sometimes rust-colored.
- Other possible symptoms include:
 - Diarrhea, sometimes with blood.
 - Low-grade fever.
 - Fatigue (low energy).

What causes Henoch-Schönlein purpura?

The cause of HSP is unknown. Genetic and immune system factors may play a role.

What are some possible complications of Henoch-Schönlein purpura?

The two main complications of HSP are disease involving the kidneys and gastrointestinal tract:

- *Glomerulonephritis*, which involves inflammation of the kidneys.
 - Occurs in one fourth to one half of children with HSP.
 - In most cases, the kidney involvement clears up without causing major problems. Your child will be followed up closely until this occurs.
- *Gastrointestinal involvement*.
 - There is a risk of serious complications related to blockage of the intestines, called intussusception.
 - *If your child has bloody or dark red bowel movements, get medical help immediately.* 
- Other types of organ involvement are possible but rare, such as seizures and other nervous system problems or testicular torsion (twisting of the testicles).

What puts your child at risk of Henoch-Schönlein purpura?


- Most common in children ages 2 to 8.
- Usually occurs during the winter.
- Twice as common in boys as girls.

How is Henoch-Schönlein purpura treated?

Most cases of HSP clear up without any specific treatment. There is little that can be done to make the disease resolve more quickly. It usually takes 3 to 10 days to clear up.

334 ■ Henoch-Schönlein Purpura

Simple treatments can help to reduce the symptoms of HSP:


- To avoid dehydration, make sure your child gets enough liquids.
- Give acetaminophen to reduce pain.
- Avoid hard physical activity.
- If the scrotum is painful or swollen, keep it elevated and apply an ice pack.
-  If your child develops severe pain in the scrotum, call our office immediately.
- *Kidney involvement.* If your child has glomerulonephritis, we may recommend evaluation by a kidney doctor (pediatric nephrologist). This specialist can perform tests to measure your child's kidney function and recommend appropriate treatments. For example, medications may be given to control high blood pressure.
- *Intestinal obstruction* is a potentially serious complication that requires immediate treatment in the hospital. If

symptoms are severe, steroids are often helpful and may prevent obstruction.

- *Other complications* (such as seizures or blood-clotting problems), although very uncommon, may also require evaluation and possible treatment.

When should I call your office?

Call our office if your child's rash and other symptoms come back after going away, if they get worse instead of better, or if brown or rust-colored urine is present.

Call our office immediately if your child develops any of the following signs of serious complications: 

- Bloody bowel movements.
- Severe pain in the abdomen.
- Coughing up or vomiting blood.
- Severe pain in the scrotum.
- Seizures.