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Side Effects of HIV Medicines

HIV and Rash

Last Reviewed: September 16, 2019

Key Points

- A rash is an irritated area of the skin that is sometimes itchy, red, and painful.
- Possible causes of a rash in people with HIV include [acute HIV infection](#), other infections, some HIV medicines, and other medicines.
- A rash due to an HIV medicine is often not serious and goes away in several days to weeks without treatment. But sometimes when an HIV medicine is causing a rash, it may be necessary to switch to another HIV medicine.
- If you have HIV, tell your health care provider if you have a rash. A rash that may not seem serious can be a sign of a life-threatening condition that requires immediate medical attention.

Why do people with HIV develop a rash?

A rash is an irritated area of the skin that is sometimes itchy, red, and painful. Possible causes of a rash in people with HIV include:

- Acute HIV infection
- Other infections
- HIV medicines
- Other medicines

Acute HIV infection

[Acute HIV infection](#) is the earliest stage of HIV infection. Symptoms of acute HIV infection may include a rash.

Other infections

Without treatment, HIV gradually destroys the [immune system](#). Damage to the immune system puts people with HIV at risk of infections, and a rash is a symptom of many infections.

Medicines

Many medicines, including some HIV medicines, can cause a rash.

A rash due to an HIV medicine is often not serious and goes away in several days to weeks without treatment. But sometimes when an HIV medicine is causing a rash, it may be necessary to switch to another HIV medicine.

If you are taking HIV medicines, tell your health care provider if you have a rash. In rare cases, a rash caused by an HIV medicine can be a sign of a serious, life-threatening condition.

What are serious rash-related conditions?

A rash can be a sign of a hypersensitivity reaction. A hypersensitivity reaction is a potentially serious allergic reaction to a medicine. In addition to a rash, signs of a hypersensitivity reaction can include difficulty breathing, dizziness, or lightheadedness. **A severe hypersensitivity reaction can be life-threatening and requires immediate medical attention.**

[Stevens-Johnson syndrome \(SJS\)](#) is a rare but life-threatening hypersensitivity reaction reported with the use of some HIV medicines. People taking HIV medicines need to know about this condition. It rarely occurs, but when it does, it can cause death.

Symptoms of SJS include fever, flu-like symptoms, rash, and painful blisters that may spread throughout the body.

If you have symptoms of SJS, get medical help immediately. SJS can be life-threatening.

This fact sheet is based on information from the following sources:

- From the Department of Health and Human Services: Guidelines for the Use of Antiretroviral Agents in Adults and Adolescents with HIV: [Acute and Recent \(Early\) HIV Infection](#) and [Adverse Effects of Antiretroviral Agents](#)
- From MedlinePlus: [Drug Allergies](#)
- From the National Institutes of Health: National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences: [Stevens-Johnson Syndrome](#)