World Journal of Pharmaceutical Science and Research
www.wjpsronline.com
Review Article
ISSN: 2583-6579
SJIF Impact Factor: 5.111
Year - 2025
Volume: 4; Issue: 2
Page: 458-470

A REVIEW ON KERATOLYSIS EXFOLIATIVA

M. K. Vijaya Lakshmi[1*], Puniparthi Sunitha[2], K. Pooja[2] and C. Sudharshan[2]

[1]Associate Professor, Faculty of Pharmacy, Bharath Institute of Higher Education and Research, Selaiyur, Chennai, Tamilnadu.

[2]B. Pharm Student, Faculty of Pharmacy, Bharath Institute of Higher Education and Research, Selaiyur, Chennai, Tamilnadu.

Article Received: 19 February 2025 | | Article Revised: 08 March 2025 | | Article Accepted: 31 March 2025

***Corresponding Author: M. K. Vijaya Lakshmi**
Associate Professor, Faculty of Pharmacy, Bharath Institute of Higher Education and Research, Selaiyur, Chennai, Tamilnadu.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15133028

How to cite this Article: M. K. Vijaya Lakshmi, Puniparthi Sunitha, K. Pooja and C. Sudharshan (2025). A REVIEW ON KERATOLYSIS EXFOLIATIVA. World Journal of Pharmaceutical Science and Research, 4(2), 458-470. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15133028

ABSTRACT

Keratolysis Exfoliativa (KE) is a rare skin disease that negatively affects physical beauty. It affects the soles and palms of the feet, making them peel and shed. It is often associated with hyperhidrosis and other environmental conditions like heat and humidity. However, genetics and other lifestyle factors are believed to affect its occurrence. Clinically, it is manifested with granular shedding of the skin, redness, irritation along with moisture and friction induced cracking. The pathophysiology of KE is caused by the impairment of the skin barrier that is brought on by moisture, friction and bacteria. The diagnosis is primarily based on case history with some distinction made due to other skin peeling diseases like dyshidrotic eczema and psoriasis. Treatment is focused on relief of the symptoms and consists of emollients, hydrocortisone, keratolytic, perspiration blocking agents, as well as changing lifestyle to reduce moisture and friction. KE is often self resolving, but ongoing support improves comfort and reduces flare-ups.

KEYWORDS: Keratolysis Exfoliativa, hyperhidrosis, pathophysiology, dyshidrotic, emollients.

INTRODUCTION

Keratolysis Exfoliativa (KE) is a chronic, non scarring dermatosis with a palmoplantar distribution which in turn is non malignant. It refers to the form of skin shedding where there is distinctive loss or peeling of the skin in the form of irregular or circular patches of thin, wrinkled skin. While it is an autoimmune disease that is not life threatening and leads the skin to permanently damage, it does cause moderate discomfort and presents severe cosmetic complications for the affected individuals. “Keratolysis” derives from the Greek “kerato” (meaning “horn” or “cornea,” signifying the

skin's outer layer) and 'lysis' ("to break or dissolve," refers to the process of skin shedding). It does not cause drying of skin which is similar to skin exfoliation, yet does not achieve the exact purpose. The term "exfoliativa" is derived from the term "flaking" and therefore refers to the condition causing flaking. Spotting Keratolysis exfoliativa is very common during the adolescent years or few years later where the affected individual will years or suffer from it will be experiencing a multitude of symptoms such as mild swelling, rash and irritating itchiness on skin while feeling as if the skin is exceedingly stretched.[1][2]

Even though its exact cause is not known, keratolysis exfoliativa is thought to be multifactorial in nature. One of the foremost causes is overheating, which can lead to excessive sweating during stressful exercises and hot climatic conditions. The skin's maceration due to oversweating leads to increased chances of shedding and breakdown. The condition is especially seen in hyperhidrosis sufferers. The skin on the affected areas often becomes pliable and wrinkled rendering a soft, moist state of dampish flaky skin. Furthermore, the condition also tends to affect the palms and feet, which are more susceptible to collection of moisture. Repeated friction is another important component in the list of possible causes of keratolysis exfoliativa. Such activities as manual work, sports, and even wearing tight footwear and gloves can aggravate the condition. Excessive rubbing of the skin is likely to lead to its breakdown and shedding. In most cases, peeling the skin itself does not hurt, but it may lead to skin cracks or inflammation which can be uncomfortable or even painful.[3]

As a consequence of perspiration and rubbing, a bacterial factor might also contribute to the development of keratolysis exfoliativa. A certain type of bacteria known as Corynebacterium, which is accepted to be a normal flora of the skin, has been suggested to be one of the causative factors of this condition. These enzymes are known to digest the keratin skin structures resulting in shedding. C. Corynebacterium is more prevalent in individuals suffering from keratolysis exfoliativa than among those with normal skin. Nevertheless, it is not conclusively known whether these bacteria are responsible for the damage, or are caused by a secondary infection. The infection that these bacteria, Corynebacterium, may cause as a secondary infective agent could lead to some complexity in the management of this condition, and increase the chances of complications.[4],[5]

Keratolysis exfoliativa is known to recur, with symptom flare-ups following periods of excess sweating, moisture exposure, or friction. It may occur for several weeks and sometimes even for months, but the condition often spontaneously resolves. In many cases, the condition does not require treatment, but can be resolved by itself, although assistance may be needed to mitigate symptoms or reduce the chances of the condition worsening. The degree to which individuals peel appears to be quite different, in some cases only a small amount of shedding occurs while others experience more extensive and persistent peeling over a major surface area. Even though the disorder is self limiting, the affected persons, as its cosmetic impacts, discomfort, as well as the secondary skin infections, the quality of life can suffer greatly.[6]

Keratolysis exfoliativa is treated with conservative approaches that protect and hydrate the skin, lower inflammation, and avert secondary infections. The first step in a treatment plan frequently involves the frequent use of moisturizing creams or emollients. These products serve to help the affected skin retain moisture and mitigate dryness, which can worsen the skin's health. Components such as glycerin, urea, or petroleum jelly are commonly used emollients for this purpose. They work by forming a protective layer on the skin which reduces water loss and thus, further dehydration. Regular application of moisturizers to the affected regions will with time improve the skin texture and minimize flaking.

For more advanced cases of keratolysis exfoliativa, low strength topical game corticosteroids may be advised. These medications are meant to mitigate inflammation and control irritation and redness that accompany the condition. Some topical corticosteroids, like hydrocortisone or mometasone found in Momate lotion, can be applied to the affected regions; however, they should be used in moderation on a short term basis in order to mitigate itching and delayed wound closure as side effects.[7]

Complications may arise when using corticoids which makes it vital to observe the guidelines provided by the health practitioner. For suspected bacterial infections, topical antibiotics are generally recommended to contain and treat the infection. Mupirocin and neomycin may be prescribed supplements to help kill any additional harmful bacteria aggravating the condition. Antisepctic lotions or creams can also be used to treat the skin to mitigate the chances of infection. While antibiotics help some, they are not required for everyone suffering from keratolysis exfoliativa, and their employment should be decided by a medical practitioner depending on the extent of the condition and any accompanying bacterial infections.[8],[9]

The causes and risk factors of Keratolysis Exfoliativa (KE) are not completely understood, but a few factors have been found which seem to trigger or worsen the condition. These include someone's lifestyle, family history, and other conditions that might damage the skin. Let us explore these factors in greater detail.[10]

CAUSES OF KERATOLYSIS EXFOLIATIVA

- **Excessive Sweating (Hyperhidrosis):** One of the primary triggers for keratolysis exfoliativa is excessive sweating, especially on the palms and soles. The accumulation of sweat can lead to maceration of the skin, which makes it more vulnerable to peeling and shedding. This condition often worsens in hot, humid settings or during physical activities that provoke heavy sweating.[11]
- **Bacterial Colonization:** The presence of Corynebacterium bacteria on the skin is frequently associated with keratolysis exfoliativa. Although these bacteria normally reside on the skin, they can overgrow in moist areas and produce enzymes that break down keratin—the protein essential for maintaining the integrity of the skin's outer layer. While Corynebacterium is implicated in the peeling process, it remains uncertain whether it acts as the primary cause or as a secondary factor.[12]
- **Friction and Mechanical Irritation:** Repeated friction or pressure—such as from tight-fitting shoes, gloves, or vigorous physical activity—can lead to skin breakdown and peeling. This is particularly true for individuals prone to sweating, since the combination of moisture and friction significantly heightens the risk. People engaged in manual labor, sports, or activities that involve constant contact with abrasive surfaces are at an increased risk.[13]

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

- **Heat and Humidity:** Warm, humid environments offer ideal conditions for excessive sweating and skin maceration, which can trigger or worsen keratolysis exfoliativa. Individuals living in tropical climates or working in hot conditions are especially susceptible.
- **Moisture:** Prolonged exposure to moisture, such as from wearing damp socks or shoes for long durations, can exacerbate the condition by softening the skin and making it more prone to shedding.
- **Genetic Factors:** There is evidence suggesting that genetic predisposition plays a role in developing keratolysis exfoliativa. Individuals with a family history of skin conditions—especially those involving excessive sweating or

a tendency for the skin to peel—might be at higher risk. Although the condition is not directly hereditary, certain skin types may be more vulnerable due to genetic factors related to skin barrier function and sweat production.[14]

- ✧ **Pre-existing Skin Conditions:** Conditions like eczema, psoriasis, or other inflammatory skin disorders can predispose individuals to keratolysis exfoliativa. When the skin is already compromised by these conditions, it becomes more susceptible to damage and peeling. Those with weakened skin barriers or chronic dryness and irritation may experience KE as a secondary complication.[15]

RISK FACTORS FOR KERATOLYSIS EXFOLIATIVA

- ✧ **Age:** Keratolysis exfoliativa is most commonly observed in younger individuals, particularly adolescents and young adults. This is likely due to hormonal changes during puberty that increase sweat production, especially on the palms and soles. As sweat production stabilizes with age, the condition may improve.[16]
- ✧ **Gender:** While both men and women can develop KE, it is more commonly seen in men, particularly during their teenage years and early adulthood. This trend may be related to higher sweat production and a greater prevalence of hyperhidrosis in men.[17]
- ✧ **Occupation:** Certain occupations that involve physical labor or environments that encourage sweating may raise the risk of developing keratolysis exfoliativa. Jobs requiring the use of protective gloves, tight shoes, or engaging in strenuous physical activity (e.g., construction work, athletics, culinary professions) can aggravate the condition.[18]
- ✧ **Sweat-Inducing Activities:** Regular participation in activities that trigger heavy sweating—such as intense exercise, sports, or working in hot environments—may increase the likelihood of developing keratolysis exfoliativa due to prolonged exposure to moisture and friction.
- ✧ **Footwear and Clothing**: Wearing tight shoes, non-breathable socks, or occlusive gloves for extended periods can increase the likelihood of developing keratolysis exfoliativa. These items create a moist, warm environment where sweat accumulates, leading to skin breakdown. Similarly, wearing synthetic materials that do not allow the skin to breathe may also contribute to the condition.[19],[20]
- ✧ **Hyperhidrosis (Excessive Sweating)**: People with hyperhidrosis, a condition characterized by excessive sweating, particularly on the palms, soles, and underarms, are at a significantly higher risk of developing keratolysis exfoliativa. The constant moisture created by excessive sweating can lead to the breakdown of the skin's outer layer.[21]
- ✧ **Climate and Weather:** People who live in tropical or humid regions may be more susceptible to keratolysis exfoliativa because hot weather causes more perspiration and the humidity keeps the skin hydrated for longer.
- ✧ **Poor Foot Hygiene:** Bacteria, such as Corynebacterium, can thrive in feet that aren't cleaned often or left wet for long periods of time, aggravating keratolysis exfoliativa.[22]

SYMPTOMS AND CLINICAL PRESENTATION

- ✧ **Skin Peeling:** Desquamation, or skin peeling, is the most noticeable sign. Usually, this starts with tiny, superficial blisters that burst, giving the skin an exfoliated or uneven appearance. White or grayish scales may be apparent as the skin layers peel off. After perspiration or extended exposure to moisture, peeling may become more apparent.[23]
- ✧ **Bruising and Redness:** In the early stages, minor erythema (redness) may accompany the peeling, and the afflicted regions may seem red, swollen, and occasionally painful.

- **Cracked, dry skin:** In extreme situations, the skin may crack or fissure and seem dry, which might cause pain. Some people may experience discomfort from this cracking, particularly if their disease develops.[24],[25]
- **Localized Involvement:** The illness primarily affects the palms and soles of the feet, although it can also affect fingers, toes, and other regions of the body. Typically, the peeling is symmetrical on both hands or feet inside the body.[26]
- **Sweating Exacerbation:** The problem may get worse due to perspiration and dampness. When the skin is wet, it may peel more intensely, and the symptoms may worsen if you wear gloves or stockings.[27]
- **Itching or Burning**: A few people complain of little tingling, burning, or itching in the afflicted regions.[28]
- **Recurrent or Chronic:** Keratolysis exfoliativa is frequently recurrent, which means it may occur intermittently and is frequently brought on by hot, muggy conditions or increased exposure to moisture.[29],[30]

PATHOPHYSIOLOGY OF KERATOLYSIS EXFOLIATIVA

A combination of mechanical, moisture-related, and maybe microbiological variables contribute to the pathophysiology of Keratolysis Exfoliativa (KE), which causes the stratum corneum—the outermost layer of skin—to shed from the palms of the hands and soles of the feet.[31] Although the precise mechanisms are not entirely known, KE is developed through a number of important processes:

- **Hyperhidrosis, or excessive moisture:** A key factor in the pathophysiology of KE is moisture. The outermost layer of the skin is weakened by prolonged perspiration or exposure to excessive humidity. As a result, the skin cells, or keratinocytes, become more brittle and likely to split apart. Creating a damp environment that disrupts the integrity of the skin barrier makes it susceptible to damage and peeling. In KE, excess moisture becomes softer and the skin is reduced with small dandruff and dirt.[32]
- **Friction force:** Friction of repeated activities (walking, crafting, sports) of palm trees and soles contributes to mechanical stress on the skin. The outer layer of the skin, especially the stratum corneum, is damaged under continuous pressure or friction, continuing to promote the peeling process. This repeated trauma can cause microthea of the epidermis, which weakens the skin's ability, its integrity, and thus accelerates the peeling process.[33]
- **Changed keratinization:** KE interrupts the keratinization process. The stratum corneum, which is usually made up of dead keratinocytes, forms a hard, protective barrier against environmental damage. KE allows for altering the process of keratinocyte maturation and differentiation. Excessive water weakens intercellular compounds (desmosomes) between keratinocytes. This means that you are more likely to lose weight and lose weight. This leads to distinctive scaling and skin peeling.[34]
- **Microbial Effects (Bacteria and Mushroom Factors):** In some cases, bacterial infections may play a role in KE. Some people in KE have identified Pity Rosport, a type of fungus. This indicates that microbial imbalances can contribute to skin damage. Bacteria such as Staphylococcus can also be involved, which can cause skin irritation and inflammation, and can exacerbate the detachment process. However, microbial involvement is not a universal finding in all cases of KE.[35]
- **Inflammatory Reaction:** The skin decline process of KE is usually mild, but can cause an inflammatory response. Especially in the early stages of the condition, the skin is red (erythematous) and slightly inflamed. This mild inflammation can be caused by disturbances in the protective barrier of the skin and subsequent irritation due to moisture or friction.[36]

✧ **Stratum corneum dysfunction:** The stratum corneum, the outermost layer of the epidermis, is intended to protect the body from water loss and environmental damage. In KE, keratinocytes in this layer can maintain normal aggregation, leading to skin decline. Obesity and water retention in the stratum corneum are affected. This reduces skin barriers and makes them susceptible to physical damage and detachment.[37],[38]

DIAGNOSIS OF KERATOLYSIS EXFOLIATIVA

Corneal Degradation - Diagnosis of Exfoliativa (KE) is primarily clinical. That is, it is based on the patient's medical history and the patient's clinical representation. Although there is no final examination of KE, dermatologists rely on specific diagnostic procedures to distinguish them from other diseases that can cause similar symptoms. Here you can find an overview of the diagnostic process for KE.[39],[40]

✧ CLINICAL TESTS

A thorough physical examination is the first step in diagnosing KE. The characteristics that dermatologists are looking for are:

1. **Skin skin**: The most well-known condition is the excretion of the outer layer of the skin, which appears primarily as stained superficial peeling.[41]
2. **Mild erythema (redness):** can cause slight inflammation or redness in the affected area, especially in the early stages.
3. **Lack of bladder:** In contrast to conditions such as distributive eczema, KE is usually not available for large bubbles. The skin may become dry, cracked, or wrinkled, but it is usually not ulcerated.
4. **Bilateral presentation:** conditions often affect both palm trees and both soles symmetrically.

A lack of systematic symptoms (such as fever or discomfort) can help distinguish KE from other diseases where skin changes may be widespread.[42]

✧ MEDICAL HISTORY

ANAMNESIS Dermatologists occupy detailed anmnesis of medical history to assess potential risk factors and to assess factors in KE.

1. **Excessive sweating (hypercytosis):** KE is often especially sweating for people who have been overly sweating,
2. **Environmental Factors:** Prehistoric times of exposure to high humidity, friction, or activities that increase moisture loads (such as wearing obstructive shoes and gloves) are important.
3. **Family History:** A family history of similar skin diseases or hypertension may increase the likelihood of KE.

The presence of underlying skin diseases or early dermatology problems may also provide useful knowledge.[43]

✧ DIFFERENTIAL DIAGNOSIS

Several other diseases may have skin peeling or peeling. Therefore, it is important to distinguish KE from these disorders.[44] Some of the conditions that need to be excluded are:

1. **Dyshidrotic Eczema:** shows small, itchy foam in the palms and soles of the shoes that later split and lead to scaling and detachment. KE usually doesn't have the intensive itching that can be seen with inventive eczema.
2. **Polyasis:** Psoriasis can usually cause thick, scaly plaque on the elbows, knees and scalp. Although Palmoplantals can mimic psoriasis, it is unlikely that it will affect palm trees and underneath.[45]

3. **Tinea (Fungal Infection):** Fungal infections, such as athlete's foot, can cause peeling and scaling on the soles of the feet. A fungal culture or microscopic examination can help confirm whether a fungal infection is the cause.
4. **Exfoliative Dermatitis:** This is a more widespread skin condition that causes extensive exfoliation. While keratolysis exfoliativa (KE) typically affects only the palms and soles, exfoliative dermatitis tends to affect larger areas of the skin.[46]
5. **Contact Dermatitis:** Caused by exposure to irritants or allergens, this condition leads to redness, inflammation, and peeling. The presence of a known irritant or allergen can help differentiate contact dermatitis from KE.
6. **Infections (Bacterial or Viral):** Infections, such as those caused by staphylococci or streptococci, can also lead to peeling. A skin culture can help rule out bacterial infections as the cause.[47]

✧ **LABORATORY TESTS**

While the diagnosis of KE is typically clinical and does not require lab tests, they may be used to exclude other conditions when needed:

1. **Skin Scraping:** A scraping of the skin can be examined microscopically to check for fungal hyphae, which helps identify fungal infections like tinea.
2. **Skin Culture:** If a bacterial infection is suspected (e.g., Staphylococcus or Pityrosporum yeast), a skin culture may be taken to identify the pathogen.
3. **Patch Testing:** If contact dermatitis is suspected, patch testing can be used to identify specific allergens or irritants.[48]

✧ **Histopathological Examination (Skin Biopsy)**

In rare cases where the diagnosis is uncertain, a skin biopsy may be done. This can help distinguish KE from other skin conditions with similar symptoms, such as psoriasis or eczema. The biopsy generally reveals:

- Superficial epidermal detachment without significant inflammation.
- A minimal presence of inflammatory cells, which is typical for non-inflammatory conditions like KE. This procedure is generally not necessary unless the diagnosis is unclear or the case is unusual.[49]

✧ **Response to Treatment**

In some instances, KE can be further confirmed by observing its response to treatment. KE often improves with topical treatments, such as moisturizers, corticosteroids, and keratolytic agents. A positive response to these treatments supports the diagnosis of KE.[50]

TREATMENT OPTIONS FOR KERATOLYSIS EXFOLIATIVA

Although Keratolysis Exfoliativa (KE) is a self-limiting condition and often resolves on its own, treatment is focused on symptom management and prevention of flare-ups. The goal of treatment is to address the excessive moisture, skin irritation, and discomfort while promoting the healing of the skin. Several treatment options are available, ranging from topical therapies to lifestyle modifications.[51]

Below are the key approaches:

✧ **Topical Treatments**

1. Emollients and Moisturizers

- Moisturizers are critical in managing KE, as they help restore the skin's natural moisture barrier. Regular use of thick, occlusive moisturizers or emollient creams (e.g., petroleum jelly or lanolin-based products) can help prevent further moisture loss and soothe the skin.
- Applying moisturizers frequently, especially after washing or sweating, helps maintain skin hydration and prevents the skin from becoming too dry or cracked.[52]

2. Topical Corticosteroids

- Mild to moderate corticosteroids (such as hydrocortisone cream) may be prescribed to reduce inflammation and irritation associated with KE, especially in the early stages when erythema (redness) and inflammation are prominent.[53]
- Corticosteroid creams help alleviate itching or burning sensations, although they should be used cautiously and for a limited time to avoid potential side effects like thinning skin. Keratolytic Agents.
- Keratolytic agents like salicylic acid or urea-based creams can help break down and remove dead skin cells, promoting the exfoliation of the outermost skin layer and preventing excessive buildup.
- These agents help in softening and sloughing off the thickened or dead skin, facilitating the regeneration of healthy skin underneath.[54]

3. Antiperspirants

- Topical aluminum chloride (found in antiperspirants) can be used to control excessive sweating (hyperhidrosis), one of the primary contributing factors to KE. By reducing sweat production, antiperspirants can prevent moisture buildup and reduce the occurrence of skin peeling.
- Antiperspirants are typically applied at night, as this allows the active ingredients to work effectively.[55]

✧ **Oral Medications**

1. Oral Retinoids

- In severe or persistent cases, oral retinoids (e.g., acitretin) may be prescribed to regulate skin turnover and reduce excessive shedding. Retinoids help normalize the keratinization process, which may be altered in KE.
- However, oral retinoids are generally reserved for more severe cases due to potential side effects, such as dry skin, lip inflammation, and teratogenic effects (birth defects), so they should be avoided during pregnancy.[56]

2. Antibiotics or Antifungals

- If there is a secondary bacterial or fungal infection contributing to the condition (e.g., Pityrosporum yeasts), oral antibiotics (such as doxycycline) or antifungal medications (like fluconazole) may be prescribed.
- These medications are typically used if a bacterial or fungal infection is identified as part of the pathophysiology of KE.[57]

✧ **Lifestyle Modifications**

1. Moisture Control

- Reducing moisture exposure is a key strategy in managing KE. Individuals should focus on keeping the affected areas dry, especially the palms and soles, by using absorbent foot powders or talcum powder to minimize sweat accumulation.
- Wearing breathable, moisture-wicking socks and shoes can help prevent excessive sweating and moisture buildup. Avoiding tight, occlusive footwear and allowing feet to air out periodically can be beneficial [58].
- It's also important to dry the skin thoroughly after washing or sweating. Using a towel to gently pat the skin dry, rather than rubbing it, can help reduce irritation.[59]

2. Avoiding Friction

- Friction from shoes, gloves, or manual labor can exacerbate KE symptoms. Wearing well-fitting shoes and protective gloves (preferably those that are breathable and moisture-wicking) can help reduce the risk of friction-induced skin damage.[60]
- If possible, individuals should limit activities that involve excessive friction on the palms and soles, such as prolonged walking or standing.[61]

3. Frequent Skin Care

- Consistent care and attention to the skin are important. This includes regular use of moisturizers and avoiding harsh chemicals or detergents that might further irritate the skin.
- Individuals with excessive sweating might benefit from using antiperspirant products regularly to control moisture and prevent triggering further peeling.[62]

✧ **Preventative Measures**

1. Foot Hygiene

- For individuals with KE affecting the feet, maintaining good foot hygiene is critical. This includes frequent washing of the feet with mild soap and water, followed by complete drying before putting on socks or shoes.[63]
- Foot baths using Epsom salt or vinegar may be soothing and help reduce irritation and excessive sweating.

2. Protective Footwear

- Individuals with KE affecting the soles of their feet should opt for well-fitting, breathable shoes. Shoes made from natural materials (e.g., leather) or moisture-wicking fabrics can help reduce sweating.
- Avoiding occlusive or tight-fitting shoes can help minimize friction and the buildup of moisture, thus reducing the chance of skin irritation and peeling.[64],[65]

CONCLUSION

Keratolysis exfoliativa is a self-limiting skin condition that primarily affects the palms and soles, leading to recurrent peeling and dryness. While it often resolves on its own, flare-ups can be triggered by excessive sweating, moisture exposure, and friction. Conservative treatment approaches, including regular use of moisturizers, emollients, and, in some cases, mild topical corticosteroids, can help manage symptoms and improve skin health. In cases where secondary infections arise, topical antibiotics may be necessary. Although the exact causes remain unclear, lifestyle factors, genetic predisposition, and environmental triggers appear to play a role. Managing the condition effectively

requires a combination of skin protection, hydration, and, when needed, medical intervention to reduce discomfort and prevent complications.

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