

Itching and Scratching

A Reading A-Z Level R Leveled Book
Word Count: 980

Connections

Writing

Write about a time when you felt very itchy. What caused the itch, and what did you do about it?

Science and Art

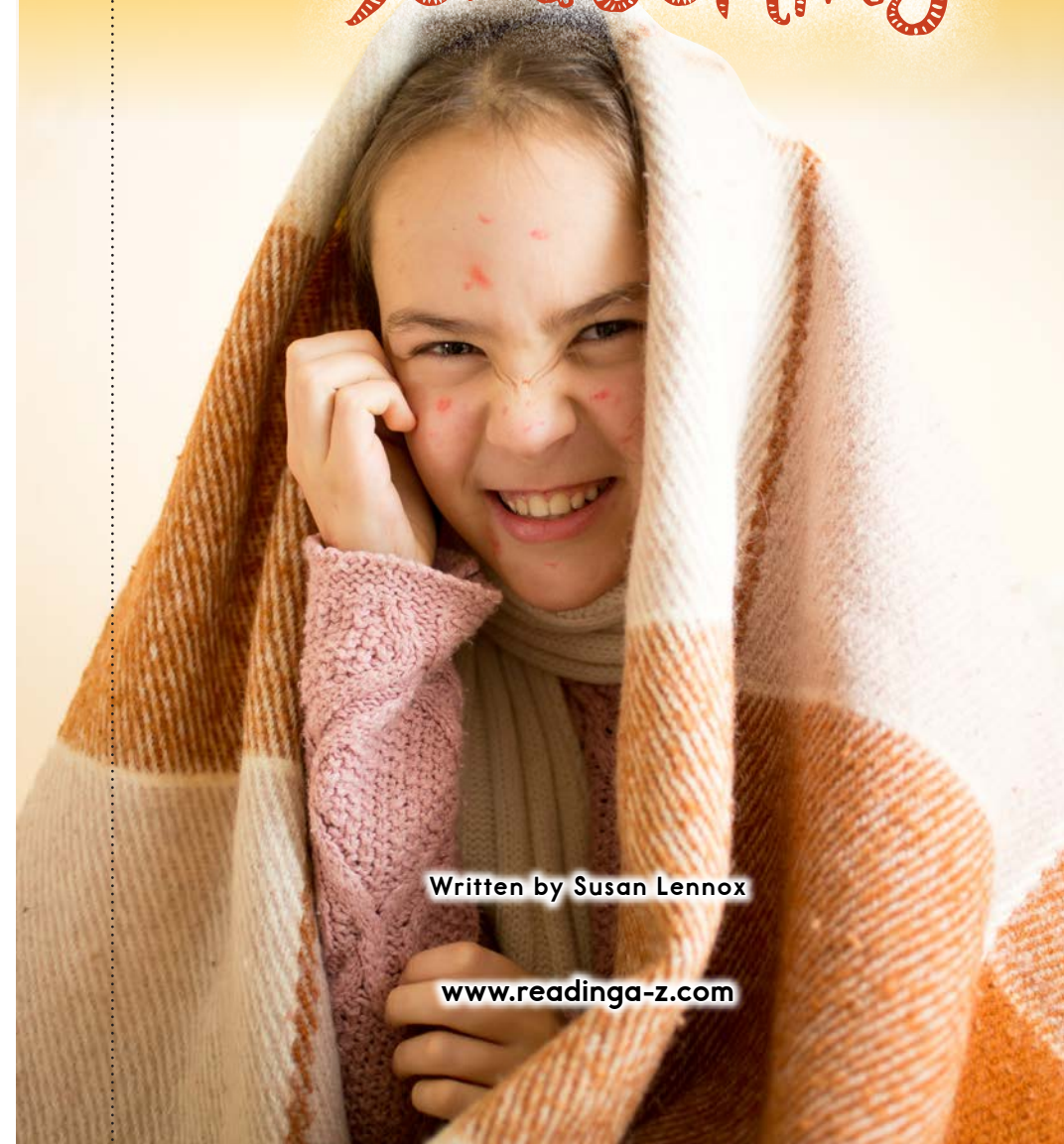
Draw a picture of the itch-scratch cycle. Then write about how this cycle makes itching worse, and discuss better ways to get rid of itchiness.

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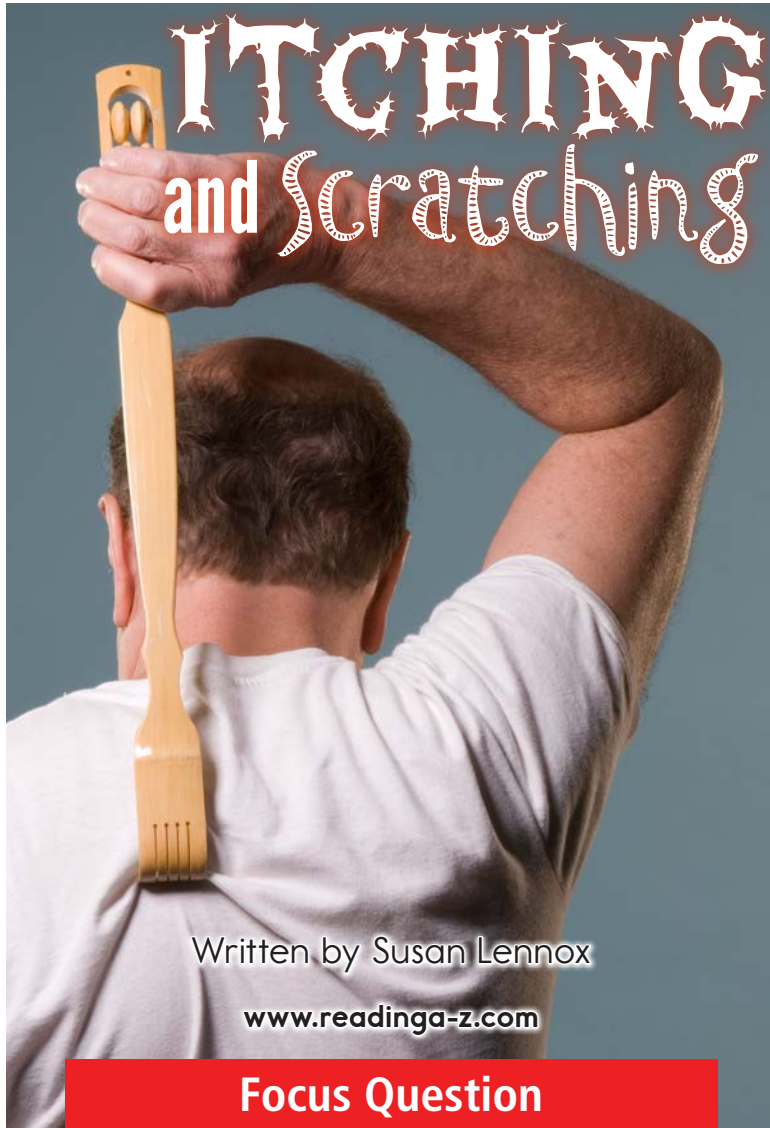
LEVELED BOOK • R

ITCHING and Scratching



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Focus Question

Why do our bodies itch, and how can we get rid of itchiness?

Words to Know

allergic	infected
chronic	irritating
damage	relief
dangerous	topical
germ	

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Correlation

LEVEL R

Fountas & Pinnell	N
Reading Recovery	30
DRA	30



Scratching may temporarily ease an itch, but it's not a long-term solution.

Table of Contents

Tickle, Touch, Scratch	4
More Than Skin-Deep	5
Causes of Itching	7
It's a Real Pain ... or Is It?	11
Oh, What a Relief!	13
Itch, Scratch, Learn	15
Glossary	16

Tickle, Touch, Scratch

It starts with a tickle. You brush your hand against your skin, but the tickle continues. You can't help but scratch. Ahh, **relief**, but it lasts just a moment. Then the feeling returns, even stronger. Before long, you're scratching away again.

We've all had that experience. There are dozens of reasons for itching, and there's a good explanation for why scratching seems to relieve an itch.

More Than Skin-Deep

When you think of itching, you usually think of skin. It's true that itching happens mostly on your skin. After all, skin covers your whole body.

Skin is also the only thing that stands between the inside of your body and the outside world. All sorts of things touch your skin. Skin has nerve cells that react when something touches it. Some of those things are harmless. Some, however, are harmful or even **dangerous**. An itch is your body's way of warning that these things can hurt you.

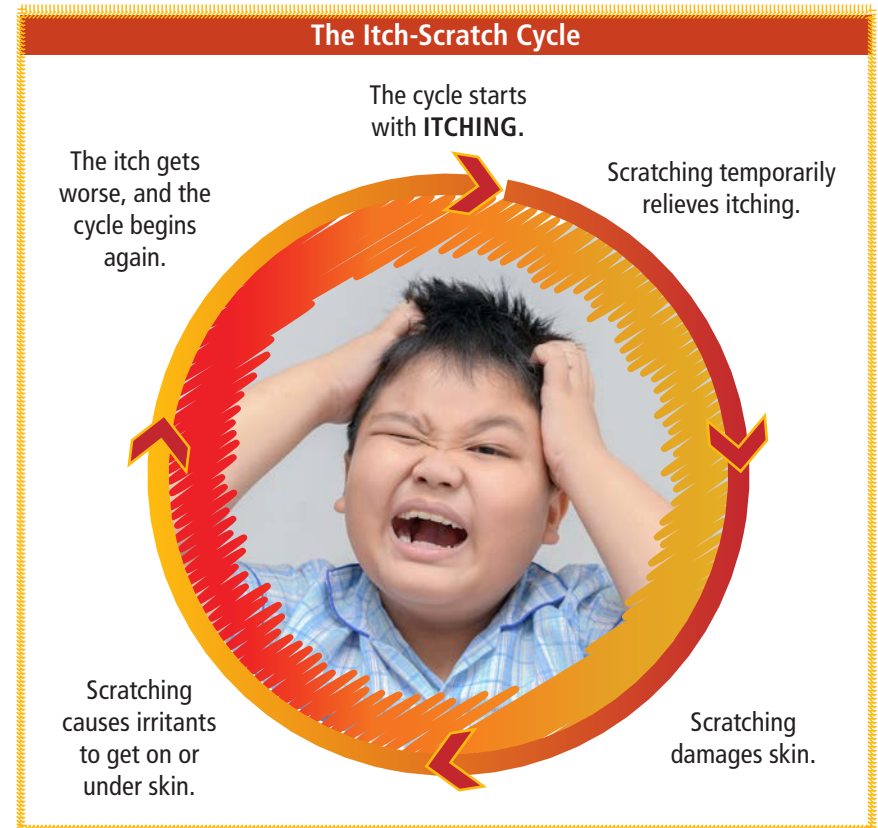
For example, many people are **allergic** to poison ivy. This plant has **irritating** oils that rub off on skin. The oils make skin blister and ooze. Open blisters can get **infected**. The oils can also affect other parts of the body, like the nose and lungs. Contact with poison ivy can cause a bad infection to develop.



Poison ivy (left) can cause a blistered, itchy rash (right).

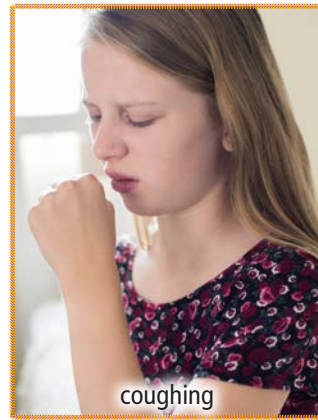
Your body uses itching to keep infections from happening. Itching is a signal from your immune system—your body's internal system that helps protect you from sickness.

When you touch poison ivy, your immune system triggers an itch. This informs you that your skin has touched something harmful. In this case, the itch teaches you to stay away from poison ivy.



Causes of Itching

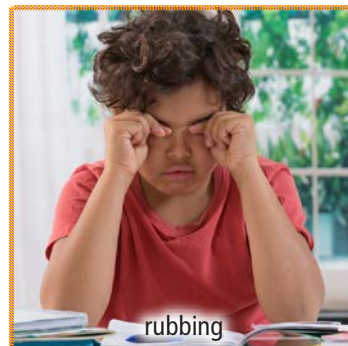
It's not just your skin that itches. Your eyes can feel itchy, too, and so can your nose and throat. Scratching is a reflex action to itching—something you do automatically, or without thinking.



However, you can't reach down your throat to scratch it, so you cough. You can't scratch inside your nose, so you sneeze. Scratching your eyes can cause **damage**, so you rub them instead.



All those actions have the same goal: to remove whatever is causing the itch. Perhaps you ate something spicy. Maybe you breathed dust or got smoke in your eyes. A good cough, sneeze, or rub could get rid of the problem!



Sometimes, though, you can't get rid of the cause of your itch easily. Sometimes the cause comes from a **germ** inside your body. The itch you feel may be part of a sickness caused by the germ.

Chicken pox is a sickness caused by a virus. The virus makes the skin break out in very itchy blisters. Today, many children get a vaccine to prevent them from getting chicken pox. Luckily, for those who do get sick, chicken pox is a temporary condition. After a while, the sickness passes.



The chicken pox rash usually starts on the face, belly, or back.



People with chronic skin conditions may see a doctor to get special medicine.

There are other itchy conditions, though, that last much longer. These are known as **chronic** conditions. Some just affect the skin. Others cause different parts of the body to itch. One chronic condition, psoriasis, speeds up the life cycle of skin cells. The cells build up on the surface and form itchy scales.

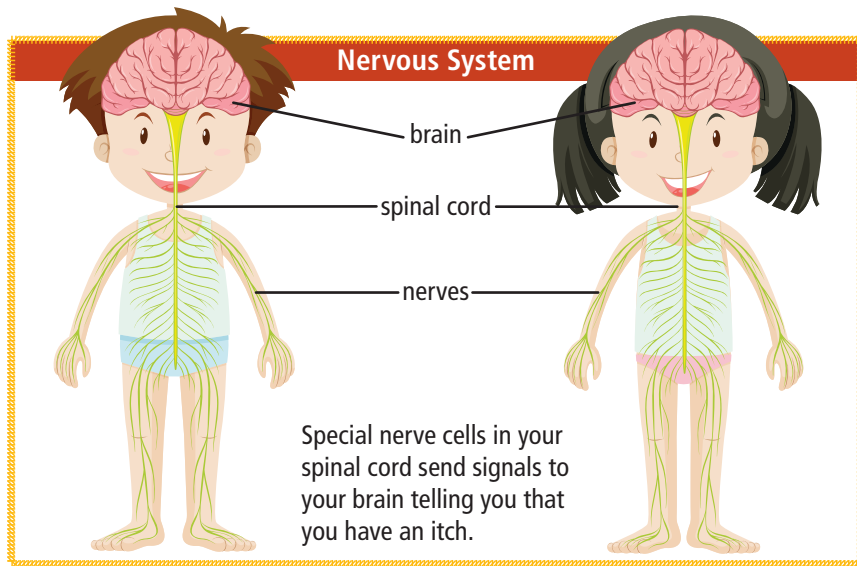
Another condition, eczema, is a rash that is common in children but can occur in people at any age. Chronic conditions have no cure. People who suffer from them can do some things to help, though. For instance, they can avoid using skin care products that may cause the condition to flare up.



Mosquitoes don't actually bite. Instead, they use their long, sharp mouthparts to pierce the skin.

Insect bites, especially mosquito bites, are another common cause of itching. Female mosquitos feast on blood. Their bites can introduce dangerous germs to your bloodstream. Mosquitos can spread serious diseases, such as malaria and dengue fever.

Fortunately, their bite causes your body to itch almost immediately. The itch catches your attention and makes you swat the insect away to protect yourself from even more bites. In this case, an itch can be a real lifesaver!



It's a Real Pain . . . or Is It?

People once thought that itching was a form of pain. It isn't. It does have a relationship with pain, though. That relationship is why scratching helps relieve itching.

Your body has a network of nerves that feel all sorts of sensations. Nerves that sense itching overlap with nerves that feel pain. Nerves can only sense one feeling at a time. Unlike itching, scratching is a form of pain. When you apply pain by scratching, coughing, or rubbing, the painful feeling blocks the itch. For some people, the pain is almost pleasant because it stops the misery of itching.

Too much scratching can cause problems. If you scratch until you bleed, you set yourself up for infection. Scratching blisters can leave scars. Constantly rubbing your eyes can hurt them. A coughing fit makes it hard to catch your breath.

Creepy Crawlies

One of the creepiest sources of itching is the mango fly of Africa. This insect may lay eggs on clothes hung out to dry. When the eggs hatch, the larvae burrow under the skin of the person wearing the infected clothes. The larvae cause serious itching until they mature and burst out from sores on the skin.



Oh, What a Relief!

Scratching temporarily relieves itching, but it's not a good long-term solution. For chronic itching, you need lasting relief. The best solution, of course, is to remove the cause of the itch. Sometimes, though, that is not possible.

Lotions and creams can offer some relief, and so can eyedrops. These are **topical** medicines, which means they are applied to the surface of the body. Topical medicines contain substances that soothe itches. Some people have even found relief by taking a bath in oatmeal!




People use gel from the aloe plant to relieve itching.




aloe plant

For severe itching, you may have to take oral medicines. These come in the form of pills, capsules, or liquids that you swallow. Oral medicines block or lessen your body's response to whatever causes an itch. The urge to scratch goes away.


Itchy Critters



brown bear



garter snake



otter

Animals scratch for many of the same reasons humans do. But there's another reason that animals scratch: they need to molt. *Molting* means shedding fur, feathers, or skin as the animal grows or as the seasons change. Furry animals shed hair. Birds lose feathers. Reptiles such as snakes crawl out of their old skin. Scratching speeds the process along. Animals may rub against trees or rocks to get rid of their old layers.

Itch, Scratch, Learn

Feeling itchy isn't fun, but think of it as a safety mechanism. It's part of your body's amazing defense system. Itching lets you know what is bad for you and teaches you to avoid it.

The next time you feel itchy, ask yourself why—before you scratch. Learning what makes you itch and avoiding it is the best way to keep from getting itchy again!

Things You Can Do

If you have troublesome itching, there are some things you can do that may relieve it and prevent damage caused by scratching. These include:

- patting or tapping the itchy area rather than scratching it.
- holding a cold, damp cloth against the itchy area to cool it down.
- washing in cool or lukewarm water.
- using nonperfumed skin care products.
- avoiding wearing clothes that irritate your skin, such as wool or polyester.
- applying a cream to dry or flaky skin.

Glossary

allergic (<i>adj.</i>)	having or relating to an abnormal reaction to a usually harmless substance (p. 5)
chronic (<i>adj.</i>)	lasting or happening often over a long period of time (p. 9)
damage (<i>n.</i>)	harm done to someone or something (p. 7)
dangerous (<i>adj.</i>)	able or likely to cause harm (p. 5)
germ (<i>n.</i>)	a tiny living thing that can cause disease or sickness (p. 8)
infected (<i>adj.</i>)	having disease-causing germs (p. 5)
irritating (<i>adj.</i>)	causing annoyance, anger, or discomfort in the body (p. 5)
relief (<i>n.</i>)	the state of being free from worry or suffering (p. 4)
topical (<i>adj.</i>)	used or made to be used on the surface of the body (p. 13)