

## SCARRING/SCLERODERMA

### Causes & Risk Factors

Scleroderma involves an excess formation of scar tissue, which decreases blood flow to your extremities and causes the hands and organ tissue to become hard. When you have scleroderma, your cells make too much collagen, as if you were injured and needed to replace dead skin. The extra collagen in your tissues then prevents your body's skin and organs from functioning properly. (6)

Scleroderma is not contagious; you cannot catch this disease. The cause is not exactly clear to scientists, but we do know that it's an autoimmune disease that occurs when the body's immune system begins to attack its own healthy cells.

Based on the research, here are some facts about the risk factors associated with scleroderma (7):

- Women between the ages of 30 and 50 are most at risk of developing scleroderma. Data suggests that approximately 80 percent of patients with scleroderma are female, and one-half develop the condition before the age of 40.
- African- and Native Americans are more at risk than Caucasians.
- Children can develop scleroderma, but this is rare and the disease is different than it is for adults.
- Scleroderma has a worse prognosis in individuals older than 65 because they are at a higher risk of complications like pulmonary hypertension.
- A family history of autoimmune connective tissue diseases, such as [lupus](#), may increase the risk of developing scleroderma.
- Some environmental factors may trigger scleroderma, such as silica (a chemical compound made of silicon) and solvents.

### 6 Natural Treatments for Scleroderma

Although there is no one treatment plan for every patient with scleroderma, certain natural remedies can help to minimize the damage to specific affected organs. Researchers indicate that addressing nutrition, pain, musculoskeletal disease and emotional aspects of the disease (such as social withdrawal, fear and depression) can be beneficial to the patient. With that in mind, here are some ways to relieve the emotional and physical symptoms of scleroderma in a natural way ([11](#)):

## **1. Physical Therapy**

Physical therapy can help patients who are suffering from stiff and painful joints. Regular physical therapy can help to prevent the loss of joint motion, which occurs when blood flow decreases and your skin becomes taut. Exercises that increase range of motion include stretching the fingers, hands, wrists and shoulders. Strengthening the fingers and hands is also important when working with scleroderma patients. Exercises like squeezing putty or rice improve grip strength. ([12](#))

Physical therapy will also help a patient with scleroderma to perform everyday activities in a way that won't put stress on his or her joints. Patients often practice their stretching program at home so that the joints don't become stiff. Splints are also used to prevent the loss of range of motion and contractures. This is when the muscles, tendons or tissue harden and lead to rigid or deformed joints. ([13](#))

## **2. Reduce Pain with Exercise**

Studies show that 60 to 83 percent of patients with scleroderma experience pain that reduces their physical and social functioning. The pain associated with scleroderma varies, affecting different areas of the body and ranging in intensity, so there's not one tool for pain management that will work for everyone.

If you are able to engage in physical activity, it can help to reduce pain by relieving muscle tension, improving circulation, and stretching and strengthening your joints. Try low-impact exercises like swimming, water aerobics, walking, cycling, using an elliptical, and yoga, if appropriate.

Before you begin using exercise as a [natural remedy for joint pain](#), talk to your doctor or physical therapist about your limitations and the best approach for your body. Recent research published in *Disability and Rehabilitation* found that approximately half of patients with both limited and diffuse scleroderma are currently exercising by walking. But patients engage in a wide variety of exercise-related activities. Researchers indicate that individually designed exercise programs are most likely to support and encourage physical activity in patients with scleroderma. (14)

### 3. Moisturize the Skin

Patients with scleroderma suffer from dry, stiff and thick skin, so making sure to keep the skin moist can be helpful. Moisturize your entire body as soon as you get out of the bath or shower. Natural moisturizers like [coconut oil](#), olive oil or [almond oil](#) are some great options. As a cooling agent, essential oils with menthol can help to reduce inflammation, reduce itchiness and relieve pain. Try combining 1–2 drops of [peppermint oil](#) with ½ teaspoon of coconut oil. Apply the mixture topically to the area of concern. Start by doing a patch test on a small area of skin to make sure that the peppermint isn't irritating before you apply it to a larger area.

It's important to avoid harsh soaps, laundry detergent and household cleaners that contain dangerous chemicals, which can make symptoms worse. Also, taking very hot showers or baths can dry the skin and so can being out in the sun for too long. In the winter months, using a humidifier can also be helpful.

### 4. Remove Triggers and Eat Healing Foods

Research shows that about 30 percent of patients with scleroderma are at risk of malnutrition and in 5–10 percent of patients, gastrointestinal disorders are the leading cause of death. As part of the multidisciplinary treatment plan, patients should include nutritional intervention, which improves gastrointestinal symptoms and quality of life. (15)

Because scleroderma is an autoimmune disease, you want to avoid any food triggers that are causing an immune response and inflammation. Certain foods can particularly aggravate the

gastrointestinal tract, which scleroderma may affect. This includes refined carbohydrates, artificial ingredients, spicy foods, alcohol and caffeine.

It's also common for people with an autoimmune disease to suffer from nutrient malabsorption and food sensitivities. For this reason, trying an [elimination diet](#) may help you to pinpoint which specific foods are stimulating an immune response.

The next step is to bring [healing foods](#) into your diet. Some of the best foods that you can eat to help heal your body and reduce inflammation include:

- fresh vegetables, like asparagus, beets, broccoli, carrots, celery, cucumbers, leafy greens, mushrooms and squash
- berries, like blueberries, blackberries, [goji berries](#), raspberries and strawberries
- wild-caught fish, including salmon, halibut and mackerel (avoid shellfish)
- organic, grass-fed meat, such as beef, bison, chicken, turkey, lamb and eggs
- organic, raw dairy, like A2 cow's milk, goat milk, goat cheese and kefir
- healthy fats, like avocados, coconut oil, coconut milk, [grass-fed butter](#), olive oil and almond oil
- nuts and seeds, including almonds, pecans, pistachios, walnuts, [chia seeds](#), flaxseeds, pumpkin seeds, nut butter and seed butter
- spices and herbs, like basil, cilantro, cinnamon, cumin, garlic, ginger, oregano, rosemary and turmeric

## 5. Take (or Eat) Probiotics

Probiotics may help to relieve scleroderma symptoms because they help repair your gut and tissues. More and more research is showing that [leaky gut](#) may provide a unifying theory for most autoimmune conditions. The microbiome plays a major role in keeping the immune system in check so that it doesn't produce too many antibodies. When we have good bacteria in the gut, they help to restore a balance between pro- and anti-inflammatory immune cells.

Research conducted at the University of Utah shows that probiotics significantly improves reflux and bloating in patients with scleroderma. Participants noticed significant results after two months of daily probiotic use. (16)

Taking a probiotic supplement or eating [probiotic foods](#) is the best way to restore the balance of bacteria in your gut. Some of the best probiotic foods include kefir, [kombucha](#), yogurt, cultured vegetables, apple cider vinegar and tempeh.

## **6. Seek Counseling or Support**

There's plenty of research that indicates the many problems faced by people living with scleroderma. Patients commonly suffer from psychological distress, including anxiety, [depression](#) and body image issues. Studies show that peer support is an effective first step to reduce symptoms of depression because patients get to talk openly with someone who has experienced similar problems. Telephone or internet support groups are more common. They are better-attended than face-to-face groups, according to research, most likely because they are flexible and private. (17)

[Cognitive behavioral therapy](#) techniques and social skills training programs have also proven to be effective and beneficial for scleroderma patients. These programs help patients to deal with anxiety caused by social interactions and body image concerns. Know that if you are suffering from scleroderma, you aren't alone and there are many support groups that are in place to help you deal with the physical changes that you are experiencing. (18)