PATIENT INFORMATION LEAFLET

External skin lesions

(previously called dermatitis artefacta)

WHAT ARE THE AIMS OF THIS LEAFLET?

This leaflet has been written to help you understand external skin lesions. It explains what external skin lesions are, why they happen, and how they can be managed. It also gives information on where you can find further support.

> The leaflet is divided into three parts: **general information about ESL**, a section for **children and young people**, and a section for **parents, carers and families**.

WHAT ARE EXTERNAL SKIN LESIONS?

External skin lesions (ESL) are recognised as a functional skin condition in which visible skin changes result from external damage to the skin, rather than from an underlying skin disease. These lesions may be associated with emotional distress or psychological pressures, which can manifest physically though the skin.

This condition has been known by several names in the past, including 'dermatitis artefacta', 'factitious dermatitis' and 'dermatitis simulata'. 'External skin lesions (ESL)' is now the preferred term because it offers a clearer, more supportive way of describing the condition. It encourages patients, families and healthcare professionals to work together to support skin healing and address any underlying contributing factors.

The behaviours that lead to ESL are usually not deliberate or intentional in the way people often think of self-harm. Awareness of these behaviours varies from person to person. Some people are partly aware of what they are doing, while for others, the behaviours happen automatically or without them realising, sometimes during a 'zoned out' (otherwise known as a dissociated) state.

WHAT ARE FUNCTIONAL HEALTH CONDITIONS?

Functional health conditions are common and widely recognised. They cause real physical symptoms, but in the absence of an identifiable underlying disease, and can present in a variety of ways that can impact on that young person's functioning (in the broadest sense). For example, children and young people may experience recurrent abdominal (tummy) pain even when no underlying digestive condition can be identified. Instead, it can often be linked to psychological, emotional or social stress.

It is important to emphasise that functional conditions are not 'made up' and are not necessarily a way of seeking attention or avoiding situations. Rather, they reflect the close link between the mind and the body, and the way the body responds physically to emotional or psychological stress.

HOW DO FUNCTIONAL CONDITIONS PRESENT IN THE SKIN?

Functional conditions are a recognised cause of several skin presentations, known collectively as functional skin conditions or disorders.

The skin and the brain are closely interconnected. During embryonic development, they both originate from the same type of tissue (the ectoderm) and continue to communicate throughout life through the skin–brain axis. Functional skin conditions are thought to involve alternations in this complex interaction and may be associated with stress, emotional distress and other psychological factors.

Research in psychodermatology, which explores the relationship between the skin and the mind, is helping to deepen our understanding of these interactions and their role in skin health and disease.

Functional skin conditions can present in several ways, including:

- **Body-focused repetitive behaviours (BFRBs):** Repetitive behaviours such as skin-picking or hair-pulling (trichotillomania), which the individual may struggle to control, often causing distress or shame.
- **External skin lesions (ESL):** Skin changes resulting from external damage, of which the individual may have partial or no awareness of their development.

WHAT DOES ESL LOOK AND FEEL LIKE?

People with ESL can have a range of skin changes, including:

• red patches • swelling • grazes • burns • bruising	• blisters • cuts • scabs • scars

The skin changes often appear suddenly, sometimes overnight, and typically occur without any preceding symptoms. ESL commonly affects areas of the body that can be reached, such as the face, arms and legs. They may be sore, painful or itchy, and can lead to scarring or change in skin pigmentation. Importantly, there is no underlying skin fragility or impairment of the skin's ability to heal to known trauma. The skin changes can vary in appearance and often have unusual or irregular shapes that are not typical of other skin conditions.

People may be unaware of how the skin changes have developed or may not recall how they occurred. This can be confusing, worrying or distressing, both for the person affected and for their family and friends.

HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?

ESL is diagnosed through a careful clinical assessment, which may take place over several appointments. This includes a thorough examination of the skin and, if needed, simple tests such as skin swabs to rule out infection.

A gentle, sensitive and non-judgemental conversation about emotional wellbeing and any stresses, worries or difficulties affecting you or your child is an important part of the diagnosis. We would recommend that all young people assessed are always seen alone as well as with accompanying caregivers

> Making a **positive diagnosis of ESL helps everyone move forward with a shared understanding.** The focus is on recognising and addressing underlying emotional or psychological factors, such as stress, anxiety, or pressures at home or school, rather than concentrating on the mechanism of the skin damage itself.

WHAT CAUSES EXTERNAL SKIN LESIONS?

ESL is understood to be linked to conscious or unconscious behaviours that occur during times of emotional stress or difficulty. It is usually a sign that someone is struggling emotionally, even if this is not obvious at first.

ESL can affect people of any age but is more common in girls and young women. It may occur alongside anxiety, low mood, or neurodivergence, although many children and young people with ESL do not have a diagnosed mental health condition. In some cases, there is no clear trigger or identifiable underlying cause.

Emotional triggers can be mild and short-term or reflect a greater need for support. They may include:

- stress or emotional upset
- feelings of anxiety or low mood
- big life changes (for example, changes in family circumstances or illness)
- difficult, upsetting or traumatic experiences

- pressures at school, at home, or in relationships

HOW IS IT TREATED?

Treatment focuses on supporting the skin to heal, while also exploring any emotional, psychological and social factors that may be contributing to the condition. A better understanding of the condition can help ease worries, develop helpful coping strategies, and support improvement in symptoms over time.

We understand that ESL can be upsetting and difficult to explain. Exploring how a person is feeling and what is happening in their life is an important part of treatment. This is always approached with kindness, understanding, and without judgement.

Things are more likely to improve when everyone works together. This may include the person affected, their family or carers, school, the dermatology team and their GP, with support from mental health services if needed.

Skin care

Skin treatment aims to protect the skin and support healing. This may include:

- Gentle skin care to support healing
- Wound care and dressings where needed
- Treatment of any skin infection
- Protecting the skin from further damage or injury

Psychological and emotional support

Emotional support is a key aspect of treatment. This may include:

- Exploring underlying stresses or worries, such as bullying, schoolwork pressures, or friendship or family difficulties
- Support from parents, carers and other trusted adults
- Support from school staff, such as teachers and school counsellors
- Input from your GP or primary care team
- Referral to mental health specialists (such as a psychologist, psychiatrist or CAMHS team) where appropriate
- Psychological therapy, such as talking therapy or cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), to help manage stress, understand triggers and develop safer ways of coping

WHAT CAN I EXPECT IN THE FUTURE?

The outlook for children and young people is generally very positive, and with the right support ESL most often gets better. Early recognition, understanding and the right support can greatly improve recovery and help prevent longer-term difficulties and other functional illnesses. Recovery can take time, and ongoing support and follow-up are often important to maintain improvement and wellbeing.

WHERE CAN We FIND MORE SUPPORT?

- Contact your Primary care team/ GP practice where their counsellors, social prescribers or other staff might be able to provide support and assistance.
- Contact the pastoral support team at your child's school, they might for example have an school counsellor or Educational Mental Health practitioner who visits the school and can provide additional support.
- Great Ormond Street Hospital – functional symptoms:
  - https://www.gosh.nhs.uk/conditions-and-treatments/conditions-we-treat/functional-symptoms/
- Changing Faces (support for anyone with a visible difference, including skin conditions and scars): support line 0300 012 0275
  - https://www.changingfaces.org.uk/advice-guidance/
- Royal College of Psychiatrists:
  - Coping with stress (for young people): https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/parents-and-young-people/coping-with-stress-for-young-people

  - When bad things happen: https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/parents-and-young-people/when-bad-things-happen
  - Self-harm in children and young people: https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/parents-and-young-people/self-harm-in-children-and-young-people
- Mind:
  - For young people: https://www.mind.org.uk/for-young-people/
  - Managing stress and building resilience: https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/stress/managing-stress-and-building-resilience/
  - Apps for young people: https://mind.orchahealth.com/en-GB/featured-apps-young-people
  - Useful contacts: https://www.mind.org.uk/for-young-people/how-to-get-help-and-support/useful-contacts/
- MindEd for Families (for parents and carers):
  - https://mindedforfamilies.org.uk/
- YoungMinds:
  - For young people: https://www.youngminds.org.uk/young-person/
  - For parents and carers: https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/
- Childline (for children and young people): free on 0800 1111, or online at
  - https://www.childline.org.uk
- Samaritans (for anyone, any age): free on 116 123
- Shout (for anyone, any age): text SHOUT to 85258, free and available 24 hours a day
- NHS 111 (for urgent advice): call 111 and choose the mental health option

FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

This part of the leaflet is written for you. You might want to read it on your own, or with someone you trust.

WHAT IS GOING ON WITH MY SKIN?

You have marks or sore patches on your skin that your doctor calls external skin lesions, or ESL for short. The marks are real – and we want to help you manage them.

ESL is not caused by a skin disease or an infection. Instead, the skin is being affected by something from the outside, and this is often linked to how you are feeling inside – for example stressed, worried, upset or under pressure.

WHY DOES IT HAPPEN?

Your skin and your brain are very closely connected. When we feel stressed or upset, our bodies can react in lots of different ways – some people get tummy aches or headaches, and some people notice changes in their skin.

Other signs of stress can include trouble sleeping, feeling tired, irritable or tearful, or finding it hard to concentrate. Noticing these signs can help you spot when you need a bit of extra support.

Sometimes people 'zone out' when things feel too much. This is called dissociation. When this happens, you might not notice what you are doing or remember it afterwards. This is why lots of young people with ESL really don't know how the marks got there as we believe many happen when people are dissociating.

It can also be hard to find the words for difficult feelings. Sometimes, the body expresses what we struggle to put into words.

Sometimes the skin changes start after something upsetting or difficult has happened, such as problems with friends, changes at home, bullying, or losing someone close. After a hard time, it is normal to feel upset, worried, angry, numb or 'zoned out' for a while. These feelings usually get easier with time and support, but if they don't, or they are getting in the way of everyday life, it's important to tell someone.

THINGS THAT CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Everyone is different, but some young people say these things help:

- Talk to someone you trust – a parent or carer, a friend, a teacher, school nurse or counsellor, or your doctor.
- Notice how you are feeling – it can help to keep a simple diary of your mood and of when the skin changes appear.
- Work out what makes you stressed – thinking about what tends to make you feel stressed, on your own or with someone you trust, can help you plan ahead for difficult times. It is equally important and helpful to think about what tends to calm you down and relax you (below).
- If you have found that having a skin condition means you don't have to do things you are finding difficult – school, for example- then try to be honest about this. Your family and health professionals can be most helpful if you are open and honest with them as you can be; they should not judge you and will be keen to help.
- Look after your skin – using the creams or dressings your care team has given you.
- Look after your body – getting enough sleep, being active, eating regular meals and spending time outside can all help you cope with stress.
- Find ways to relax and switch off – for example music, drawing, sport, being outdoors, or breathing exercises.
- Try a wellbeing app – some apps can help you feel calmer. Mind has a list of apps for young people (see 'Where can I find more support?').
- Keep your hands busy when you feel stressed or 'zoned out' – for example with a fidget toy or stress ball.
- Do things you enjoy and are good at – these can help you feel more confident.
- Be kind to yourself – notice the things you do well and give yourself credit for them, even small ones.
- Break things down – if schoolwork or other things feel like too much, try making a list, setting small goals you can manage and taking regular breaks.
- Focus on what you can change – some things are out of your control. Try to put your energy into the things you can do something about.
- Ask questions – if something in this leaflet, or something your doctor says, doesn't make sense, it's fine to ask.

WILL IT GET BETTER?

Yes – for most young people, ESL gets better with time and the right support. It might not happen straight away, and there may be some repeat flare ups. This is normal. Your family, your school and your care team are all there to help you.

FOR PARENTS, CARERS AND FAMILY

Finding out that your child has ESL can bring up a range of feelings, including worry, confusion, guilt or frustration. These reactions are understandable, particularly when the skin changes are difficult to explain. This section provides more information about ESL in children and young people and offers practical advice on how you can support your child.

ESLs are part of a family of disorders called functional disorders or conditions. These are conditions that impact on your child's functioning, but do not have a skin disease underlying the rashes which develop. It is normal that when your child is assessed, they will be interviewed alone, and this is a routine part of practice.

ESL IN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Young people may also find it harder to put feelings into words, so emotional distress may show itself through physical symptoms such as skin changes.

In children and young people, ESL may be linked to a process called dissociation, or 'zoning out'. Dissociation is a state in which a person feels disconnected from their thoughts, feelings or the world around them, often without realising it. This means your child may truly not be aware of how the skin changes are happening.

HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD?

There are many things you can do to help your child. The suggestions below are based on approaches known to help children and young people with functional conditions.

Thinking about possible emotional triggers

It can help to think about what is happening in your family's life and your child's life, and whether there are any current stresses or difficulties, whether emotional or physical. Some people are aware of feeling distressed or unhappy, but for others this may be much less obvious, or not apparent at all.

Talking with your child

- Stay calm and non-judgemental – try not to question your child about how the marks happened or ask them to explain. They may not know, and pressure can increase stress and make things harder.
- Focus on feelings rather than the skin – gently asking how things are going at school, with friends or at home is often more helpful than talking about the marks.
- Keep the lines of communication open – let your child know they can talk to you at any time and give them time and space to do so without pressure.
- Help your child find words for feelings – naming your own feelings, for example 'I feel a bit worried today', shows that it is normal to talk about emotions. Some young people find it easier to express themselves through drawing, writing or doing an activity together rather than talking face to face.

Responding to the skin changes

- Help with skin care – in a matter-of-fact way, as you would for any cut or graze.
- Avoid checking or watching your child's skin closely – although this comes from a caring place, it can make a young person feel watched or blamed.
- Try not to make the skin the centre of attention – spending less time thinking and talking about the skin, and more time on other things, can help. Gently let family, friends and school know that a calm, low-key response is most helpful.
- Be consistent – a kind, supportive approach with clear and consistent responses from everyone caring for your child, including other family members and school, can help your child feel secure.

Everyday life

- Keep normal routines going – school, sleep, meals, hobbies and time with friends all support wellbeing.

- Encourage activities that build confidence and that your child enjoys.
- Plan regular enjoyable activities – such as walks, sport, hobbies or seeing friends, and try to keep these going even on more difficult days.
- Support healthy habits – a balanced diet, regular exercise, time outdoors and a good sleep routine all help with managing stress and supporting wellbeing. Most young people need help to manage uncertainty and higher stress situations and find ways to discuss these and how to manage them – such as by using relaxation techniques.

School and your child's care team

- Talk to school – with your child's agreement, letting a trusted teacher or the school nurse know can help, especially if bullying or school pressures may be involved.
- Work with the care team – coming to appointments and sharing what you notice helps everyone understand what might be contributing.
- Support both body and mind – ESL is most likely to improve when the skin and emotional wellbeing are cared for together. Your care team may recommend talking therapy or other support alongside skin treatment.
- Avoid seeking repeated tests or opinions – once ESL has been diagnosed, further investigations are unlikely to help and can add to worry for you and your child. If you notice anything new or different, discuss this with your GP or care team.

Expect ups and downs

Recovery takes time and there may be setbacks along the way. This is normal and does not mean that things are not improving. With the right support, most children and young people with ESL get better.

LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

Supporting a child with ESL can be emotionally challenging and bring its own pressures. Looking after your own wellbeing is also important. Talking to your GP, someone you trust, or a support organisation may help. Other family members, including siblings, may also have questions or concerns. Sharing this leaflet with them may help answer some of their questions and give them a better understanding of the condition.