

Understanding eczema in babies and children

Eczema is an itchy, dry skin condition that affects 15-20% of babies and children, with three quarters affecting those before the age of one¹. It is less common in later life, with only 2-10% of adults suffering^{1,2}. Childhood eczema (also called infantile eczema) may sometimes be referred to as atopic eczema or dermatitis. It is an inherited condition, so there will often be a family history of eczema or other allergic conditions (also known as atopic conditions) such as asthma or hay fever. Infantile eczema may disappear as your child gets older, but it is likely to come back as hand eczema in adulthood².

Atopic eczema is an allergic condition where, the immune system over-reacts to factors that would not normally cause harm. In eczema, this can result in changes to the skin's natural defences which cause it to become very dry and allow irritants (such as soap) and allergens (such as dust mites) to penetrate the outer layers, triggering a reaction.

Does your baby, toddler or child have eczema?

Three quarters of all eczema starts within the first year of life, but it can also develop from the age of two onwards. If you suspect that your child has eczema, you may have noticed a rash that is dry and itchy with reddened skin in areas of the face, neck, elbows, wrists, groin, backs of knees, ankles and other skin creases. Your child, or a close family member, may also suffer from another allergic (atopic) condition such as asthma or hay fever.

In some infants and babies, eczema can appear as a rash. Seek urgent medical attention if your baby suddenly develops a rash along with other symptoms such as a fever or difficulty breathing.

Managing eczema: a guide for parents and carers

There are two important ways to take control of your child's eczema and manage it on a daily basis. The first is to try and avoid any exacerbating factors, or 'triggers'.

What causes eczema?

As mentioned earlier, suffering from eczema may be down to genetic factors and it may be inherited from members of your family.

A flare-up of eczema can be triggered by environmental factors, like stress, or by contact with certain allergens or irritants. These include (but are not limited to):

- Woolen or synthetic fabrics
- Soaps and detergents
- Artificial fragrances or perfume
- Extreme temperature changes
- Airborne allergens like dust mites
- Heat, friction and sweat
- Metals such as nickel and chromate
- Rubber or latex
- Some foods like dairy products, eggs and peanuts
- Food additives like tartrazine

What you can do?

Where practical, try to identify and avoid the triggers that cause your child's eczema to flare up. Here are some small, everyday changes you can make that will help them feel more comfortable:

- Dress them with natural fibres next to the skin. Light, cotton fabrics will be more comfortable than thick, tight or scratchy materials.
- Avoid traditional soaps at bathtime and ensure that the water is only lukewarm. Hot water will sting and can make eczema worse.
- Choose a gentle laundry detergent for washing their clothes, sheets and towels. Many parents find that a non-biological option is kinder to skin.
- You may find it useful to keep a food diary so that you can understand if a particular food group causes problems.
- Finally, keep fingernails short to minimise scratching, or use cotton scratch-mittens for babies.

Soothing the itch: the importance of moisturisers

It is essential to keep eczema-prone skin hydrated in order to calm the itch and keep flare-ups at bay. A good skin care routine is another important way to keep eczema in check.

Your first line of defence is the regular use of moisturisers that are free from artificial perfumes and fragrances (sometimes referred to as emollients). If your child has fairly mild eczema, you may find that these moisturisers alone are an effective treatment. In more severe cases,

moisturisers will help to reduce the need for additional steroid creams.

Why does moisturising help?

The skin's primary function is to act as a barrier to keep moisture in and irritants out. When eczema causes skin to become dry this barrier does not work as well as it is supposed to, so even more moisture is lost and the skin is unable to keep irritants and allergens out. What's more, dry skin is itchy skin, which leads to scratching. This can cause further damage, opening it up to bacteria and the resulting risk of infection.

Moisturisers work by restoring the skin's barrier function to keep out irritants, allergens and bacteria. They keep skin moist and supple, helping to prevent painful cracks. Moisturising the skin can be done in several different ways, but all are designed to hydrate, soften and protect the outer layers of the skin.

- **Bath Additives** - Day to day bubble baths can irritate eczema-prone skin. Daily bathing is an important part of your skin care routine, reducing the likelihood of infection, but water can irritate eczema further. Bath additives that are specially designed for eczema prone skin will nourish the skin while excluding irritating ingredients, to help improve the skin's condition. Oil-based additives are especially soothing and hydrating, but some traditional baby oils are known to have the opposite effect.
- **Soap Substitutes** - Day to day, soaps are generally alkaline and often contain detergents and perfumes that can irritate eczema-prone skin. Frequent washing and exposure to water dries it out even further. Soap substitutes that are specially designed for eczema prone skin may take a little getting used to as they do not lather, but will clean just as effectively while being nourishing.
- **Sprays, lotions, creams, gels and ointments** - These are best applied to damp skin, just after a bath. Use plenty and smooth it on in the direction of hair growth, rather than rubbing it in. Sprays, creams and lotions are good for the daytime as they sink in more quickly while oil-based ointments are the best option to be used last thing at night.

When and how to apply moisturisers?

It is important to use moisturisers frequently and continuously. They are most effective on damp skin so are best applied immediately after a bath or shower. Ideally, they should be applied three to four times a day, or at least twice. Try to find a range that your child is happy using, so that it becomes less of a battle to stick to a regular routine; and ensure that their nursery, pre-school or school has a good supply as well.

When your child's skin is very dry, you can use a combination of different products. Include bath additives and nourishing soap alternatives that are specially designed for eczema prone skin in your skin care routine, as well as leave-on sprays, creams and lotions. Moisturisers are safe to use alongside other prescribed treatments, such as topical steroids.

For babies and children, look for a shampoo that is labelled as detergent-free and suitable for eczema.

The National Eczema Society offers the following guidelines on applying emollients:

- Apply liberally and frequently – ideally three to four times a day, but at least twice a day – to the whole body
- Smooth on gently in the direction of hair growth to avoid blocking hair follicles
- Apply after bathing when skin is damp
- Avoid putting your hands into large tubs of cream as this increases the risk of bacterial infection – use a clean spoon to take out the required amount
- Continue to use the emollient even when eczema has improved, to help prevent flare-ups

The National Eczema Society website contains further advice on managing infantile eczema. You can read more <http://www.eczema.org/>

References

1. *Primary Care Dermatology Society and British Association of Dermatologists Guidelines for the management of atopic eczema 2003*
2. *Hoare C, Li WanPo A, Williams H. Systemic review of treatments for atopic eczema. Health Technol Asses 2002; 4(37).*

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