

Eczema: Information for Parents

What is eczema? — Eczema is a skin condition that makes your skin itchy and flaky. Doctors do not know what causes it. Eczema often happens in people who have allergies. It can also run in families. Another term for eczema is “atopic dermatitis.”

What are the symptoms of eczema? — The symptoms of eczema can include:

- Intense itching
- Redness
- Small bumps
- Skin that flakes off or forms scale

Most people with eczema have their first symptoms before they turn 5. But eczema can look different in people of different ages:

- In babies, eczema tends to affect the front of the arms and legs, cheeks, or scalp. (The diaper area is not usually affected.)
- In older children and adults, eczema often affects the sides of the neck, the elbow creases, and the backs of the knees. Adults can also get it on their face, wrists, hands, and forearms.
- In older children and adults, the skin can become thick and dark. It might even form scars from too much scratching.

Is there a test for eczema? — No, there is no test. But doctors and nurses can tell if you have eczema by looking at your skin and by asking you questions.

What can I do to reduce my symptoms? — Use unscented thick moisturizing creams and ointments to keep the skin from getting too dry. Also, try to avoid things that can make eczema worse, such as:

- Having dry skin that has not been treated with moisturizing creams or ointments
- Being too hot or sweating too much
- Being in very dry air
- Stress or worry
- Sudden temperature changes
- Harsh soaps or cleaning products
- Perfumes
- Wool or synthetic fabrics (like polyester)

How is eczema treated? — There are treatments that can relieve the symptoms of eczema. But the condition cannot be cured. Even so, about half of children with eczema grow out of it by the time they become adults. The treatments for eczema include:

- Moisturizing creams or ointments – These products help keep your skin moist. In some cases, your doctor or nurse might suggest using a moist dressing over special creams or medicines.
- Steroid creams and ointments – These medicines are different than the steroids athletes take to build muscle. They go on the skin, and they relieve itching and redness.
- Medicines that change the way the immune system works – These medicines are only for people who do not get better with safer treatment options, and are usually prescribed by a Pediatric Dermatologist.
- Antihistamine pills – Antihistamines are the medicines people often take for allergies. Some people with eczema find that antihistamines relieve itching. Others do not think the medicines do any good. Many people with eczema find that itching is worst at night. That can make it hard to sleep. If you have this problem, talk with your doctor or nurse about it. He or she might recommend an antihistamine that can also help with sleep.

Can eczema be prevented? — Maybe. Babies who have a parent, brother, or sister with eczema have a higher risk of getting it, too. In these babies, using moisturizing creams or ointments (starting right after birth) might help prevent eczema during the first year. But doctors don't yet know if this also helps prevent eczema later on.

Remember, you don't cure eczema, but you can control it and deal with "flare-ups" effectively!

The principals of eczema management are:

1. Hydration (keeping the skin wet)
2. Emollients (greasing the skin to keep water from evaporating and then drying the skin)
3. Anti-inflammatories (steroid creams as your doctor prescribes)
4. Preventing the scratching which contributes to the itch/scratch cycle
5. Dealing with infected eczema with topical or oral antibiotics when necessary

Bathing Regimen:

This regimen includes daily, if not twice daily baths (especially in times of "flare-up"). Frequent baths are fine as long as something is done to prevent evaporation of the water from the surface of the skin. While the child is in the bath and the skin has had the opportunity to soak and hydrate, oilated Aveeno powder or Oilatum can be added to the bath water to provide the first layer of "greasiness". After the bath, the steroid as prescribed can be applied to actively red or irritated areas of the skin, and then an extremely greasy moisturizer (Vaseline, Glaxyl base, Aveeno eczema care) can be liberally applied from head to toe. If there are unusually reddened/weepy/crusted areas, a topical antibiotic might be needed as well. With this regimen you should see improvement within a few days to a week or so. There will still at times be "flare-ups", but they will be much easier to control. It may also seem like you are "chasing the eczema around the body" when one area gets better then another flares up, but this is very normal for the condition. There is controversy about whether frequent bathing can make eczema worse, but in my experience this regimen actually improves things significantly.