



What is eczema? Eczema is a very common skin condition that can appear at any age and involve any part of the body. Inflammation of the skin results in dry, red or brownish patches that can itch intensely. Sometimes they can even ooze clear fluid or thicken over time. The cause of this inflammation is not known, and a variety of factors can aggravate the condition.

Atopic dermatitis is a specific form of eczema that tends to run in families and can be associated with asthma and hay fever. It usually develops in infancy to young adulthood and tends to improve over time. Sometimes it can persist throughout life, with a waxing and waning course.

Is there a cure for eczema? There is currently no cure for eczema. It is considered a chronic condition that can last for many years. Good treatments to control symptoms are available though, and therapy may need to change from time to time depending on the severity of the disease. Treatment is aimed at avoiding flare-ups, reducing inflammation and itching, and treating skin infections.

What things can cause eczema to flare up? Factors that trigger or worsen eczema vary from person to person, but there are a few things that seem to bother almost every individual with eczema: dry skin, irritants, stress, and heat.

Dry Skin: People with eczema have a defect in a skin protein that prevents the skin from retaining moisture. As a result, eczema can get especially bad in the winter when heating is turned on and the humidity drops. Other things that dry out the skin are bathing too frequently for too long, washing with soap, and using hot water. This removes the natural moisturizers from the skin. To prevent dryness, we recommend the following:

- Bathe or shower in cool-to-warm water for no longer than 5-10 minutes, no more than once a day. AVOID HOT WATER.
- Never use a wash cloth.
- AVOID SOAP, except to clean the underarms, groin, and feet (Dove is a good mild soap). Water is actually sufficient enough to clean all other parts of the body. Using a non-soap cleanser (Cetaphil gentle skin cleanser) is best.
- If you take a bath, do not add anything to the water unless advised by your doctor. Do not take bubble baths.
- Immediately after bathing, PAT the excess water off the skin gently (do not rub dry). While the skin is still DAMP, apply prescription creams to the rash areas only, then apply a bland moisturizer such as Cetaphil Cream, Eucerin Cream or Vaseline petroleum to the rest of the body.

Irritants, heat, stress:

- Avoid wool or other rough, scratchy clothing (100% cotton is best).

- Avoid harsh chemicals, soaps, bubble baths.
- Don't overheat your house and avoid dressing too warmly. Sweating can worsen eczema.
- Stress reduction can improve your symptoms.

Do food allergies cause eczema? No. For most people, foods do not cause eczema to worsen. There are no standard dietary guidelines we recommend eczema patients to follow. However, certain patients notice a pattern of flare-ups with certain foods. If you suspect a particular food (e.g. cow's milk, eggs, or peanuts) is causing your eczema to flare, please discuss this with your doctor.

What can be done to help relieve the itching? Preventing dry skin, treating the rash with a steroid cream or ointment, AND taking an antihistamine (Benadryl, hydroxyzine) are the main treatments for the itching associated with eczema.

- If cortisone creams or ointments have been prescribed, they should be applied only to those areas which are red or itching. They should be applied immediately after bathing and one other time each day about 10-12 hours apart. Avoid putting cortisone creams on normal skin and stop once your rash has resolved. Unnecessary, prolonged use of steroids can result in thinning and discoloration of the skin, as well as stretch marks.
- When the rash quiets down, use the steroid cream at least once a day for a few more days. After that, stop and just use a bland moisturizer. If the eczema recurs, use the steroids immediately on any spot that itches.

What can be done to reduce the chances of skin infection? Scratching can cause breaks in the surface of the skin through which bacteria can enter and cause an infection. Try not to scratch as much as possible. Keep your fingernails trimmed short and your hands clean. Sometimes the application of an ice or cold pack can relieve the itch without traumatizing the skin.

For more information about eczema and atopic dermatitis go to:
www.skincarephysicians.com/eczemanet or www.nationaleczema.org