

A Child with Eczema: A Parent's Guide

What is eczema?

Originally the term eczema was used to describe any itchy rash that blistered; now eczema describes skin which is red (inflamed) and intensely itchy. "Atopic dermatitis" is another term for the most common type of eczema in children.

What causes eczema?

Children with eczema have trouble keeping moisture in their skin. For some people using soap and water just once can make their skin red and dry. Eczema can run in families. It can also be seen in people where there is a strong family history of asthma or hay fever.

Is eczema due to allergies?

No, many people believe that allergies cause eczema, but this is not true. Eczema is caused by problems in the way the skin retains water. Getting rid of things in your home that you think cause allergies won't help. There is very little data to show that positive allergic skin reactions are related eczema. Changing your child's diet or putting them on a special diet will not improve the condition.

How do I treat my child's eczema?

The most important aspect of eczema care is properly treating your child's skin so that prompt healing takes place. There is no single medication that will cure eczema. The aim is to help keep your child's skin moist and have it be as close to normal skin as possible. For most children it is possible to treat eczema effectively and keep it in check using this simple treatment plan:

Emollients and lubricants

Since the main problem with your child's skin is that it can not maintain moisture, the goal of therapy is to keep the skin as moist as possible. Emollients and lubricants are products that moisturize and soften the skin. They keep the surface of the skin supple and help to reduce itching. Even after your child's skin clears, he or she will need to use these products every day to keep the skin moist and prevent future flare-ups. Putting on the emollient is as important as brushing your child's teeth. Emollients and lubricants are safe and should be used frequently during the day.

Drinking extra water does not help. The moisture on the skin surface comes from the moisture content of the air next to the body. A home humidifier may help.

How to wash the skin:

Washing with regular soap removes the water-binding substances on the skin. Only synthetic detergents such as cetyl alcohol soaps or cleansers should be used; (brand names: Cetaphil, Moisturel). Massage the detergent into the skin and allow it to foam. Pat the skin dry. Do NOT rinse.

Topical steroid or anti-inflammatory ointments/creams

The use of an appropriate topical steroid is safe and an essential part of any eczema treatment. Your child's doctor will probably prescribe topical steroids in the form of an ointment.

Apply the steroid ointment *twice every day* to the areas that are scaly and red. When your child takes a bath the medication should be applied immediately after the bath while the child's skin is still wet.

Mild topical steroids such as Synalar (Fluocinolone acetonide) or DesOwen (Desonide) are usually enough for most children. Occasionally, your doctor may determine that a stronger steroid medication is required. If your child's skin has thickened from the eczema, then the steroid should be used until the area of skin feels flat and smooth. This often takes 6 to 8 weeks. Your child's doctor will tell you when you can stop using the steroid.

How much steroid ointment should I put on the skin?

Cover the eczema patches evenly with a fine film of ointment/cream so that the surface of the skin glistens in the light. A good way to get the right amount is to use the end of your finger as a guide. Squeeze out a line of ointment that goes from the fingertip to the first joint of the finger -- this is referred to as a 'fingertip unit'. One fingertip unit should be enough to cover an arm or leg of an infant. Always apply the ointment/cream in a downward direction leaving a thin film on the surface. DO NOT rub in the ointment/cream to make it disappear. You want just enough so that the skin glistens in the light.

Should you be concerned about using steroids?

When used correctly steroids are safe for children. Topical steroid preparations come in different strengths. Using a mild or moderately strong topical steroid is generally quite safe. Parents are often anxious about using topical steroids, but you don't need to be.

If a super strong steroid is misused it can cause problems such as thinning the skin. Strong steroids should not be used on a regular, long term basis, but sometimes it is necessary to use them for a short period of time to rapidly control severe inflammation. This should only be done while your child is under a doctor's care.

Antihistamine medication

Eczema is very itchy, so it is important to control your child's itching and scratching.

- If your doctor prescribes an antihistamine give it an hour before your child goes to bed.
- If your doctor prescribes one of the 'non-drowsy' antihistamines, like Zyrtec®, give it first thing in the morning.
- Some infants and toddlers may become irritable after being given antihistamines. If this happens, you should notify your doctor and stop using it.

Antihistamines aren't addictive and there is no evidence to suggest that long-term use is dangerous. They reduce the itching and some can act like a sedative so that children can get a good night's rest.

Antihistamine creams or lotions should not be used. They may cause an allergic reaction and recent studies have shown that they don't help control itching in people with eczema.

Wet dressings

Your child's doctor may recommend wet dressings for children with particularly bad eczema. Wet dressings soften your child's skin and relieve itching. Wet dressings are applied as follows:

- 1) Put the prescribed steroid ointment/cream on your child's skin.
- 2) Take a pair of your child's sleepers or pajamas and soak them in warm water.
- 3) ***Wring out*** the sleeper until it is only slightly damp.
- 4) Put the damp sleeper on your child and cover it with a second, dry sleeper. **DO NOT COVER WITH PLASTIC.**
- 5) Make certain the room is warm enough.
- 6) Your child may complain that he or she is uncomfortable, but stay firm. This is the best and fastest way to rapidly moisturize the skin to help with dryness, irritation and itching.

Wet dressings help eczema in many ways:

- The steady evaporation of water makes the skin feel cool. The cool feeling keeps it from itching
- The wet dressings restore moisture to the dry skin surface.
- The wet dressing enhances the effect of the steroid ointment/cream.
- The wet dressing makes it hard for your child to scratch or rub their skin which helps the skin heal.

What can make eczema worse?

Eczema is influenced by many environmental factors. Some things that can make it worse are:

- Synthetic or woolen fabrics. Dress children in cotton or cotton blend clothes.
- Do not use soap. Use a synthetic detergent such as Cetaphil or Moisturel cleanser.
- Drooling can cause both eczema and chapped skin around the mouth. This is often made worse when children lick their lips or suck on a pacifier.
- Acidic foods like citrus fruits and tomatoes can cause chapping. To keep this from happening put a thin layer of Vaseline around the mouth before meals and other times during the day as necessary.
- Keep your child's fingernails short.
- Don't let your child get too hot. Keeping rooms well ventilated is important
- Sheets and pillowcases should be all cotton, or with as high a percentage of cotton as possible.
- Hard water may irritate the skin. Water softeners may help.
- Do not buy tight fitting clothing. Loose cotton clothing is best.

Are the bacteria that live on the skin important?

Children with eczema are likely to get skin infections from both bacteria and viruses. Because the skin is often cracked and open from lack of moisture and from scratching, the bacteria and viruses and easily get through the protective layers. If the eczema gets worse all of a sudden, this is probably a bacterial infection and usually needs to be treated with an antibiotic. If you suspect a skin infection, you should call your child's doctor as soon as possible.

It is important to keep children with eczema away from anyone with an active cold sore because they may catch the virus. This could result in a viral infection that covers the entire body. Children with eczema are also susceptible to the viruses that cause the common wart and molluscum contagiosum. These often show up as lots of small skin-colored bumps that don't go away. Eventually, the bumps will disappear, but it can take up to 5 years if they aren't treated.

Is it better to breast-feed?

Yes, if possible. Although there is no evidence that breast-feeding will prevent your child from developing eczema, breast-feeding does seem to protect against flare-ups during the first few months after birth.

Is the sun good for my child's eczema?

Eczema usually improves in the sun, especially on vacation! However it is important that children with eczema be kept cool in the hot weather as they can get heat rash if the skin is overheated. Use sunscreen to protect from sunburn. In hot weather wearing a loose fitting wet T-shirt will help keep your child cool and reduce itching.

Can my child go swimming?

Yes, in fact swimming in the ocean is excellent for eczema. However, swimming pool water has chlorine in it which may irritate the skin. Before swimming in a pool put on a thin layer of moisturizer, such as Vaseline. After swimming have your child shower or bathe for five to ten minutes. This will help restore moisture to your child's skin. Pat the skin dry and then apply moisturizer or an emollient.

Can children with eczema be immunized?

- Yes, your child should receive all the routine immunizations, except **SMALLPOX** just like all other children. Occasionally, some of the immunizations may aggravate eczema for a few days afterwards, but this is usually not a problem.
- Children with eczema should **NEVER** be vaccinated against **SMALLPOX**. You and the others in the household also should not be vaccinated.
- If the child has a history of egg allergy, the MMR and measles vaccines are safe. If you are seriously concerned then these injections should be given under close medical supervision.

Is there anything special my child needs to do at school?

School can sometimes be a problem for children with severe eczema and it is important to work closely with the teacher and principal. It is best if the child is seated in the center of the class, away from doors, windows and radiators. They should use their own soap substitute and take moisturizing lotion or cream to school. Teach your child to apply their lotion at breaks and lunchtime. Most schools will cooperate when told about the problem. It is important that children do not miss school because of their eczema.

Will my child 'out grow' eczema?

The tendency to have sensitive skin will remain with your child into teenage years, but will gradually improve. Most children show improvement by age 5. By the teenage years they generally only have occasional trouble with eczema; some people, however, continue to have eczema into adulthood.

Are alternative or complementary treatments helpful?

No. There are no good scientific studies which show that homeopathy, allergy shots, changing diets, Chinese herbal medications, acupuncture, acupressure, spinal adjustments or therapeutic touch improve eczema. Eczema gets better and worse naturally.

Author: Joanna Burch
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13123 E. 16th Avenue, Aurora, Colorado 80045 • 720-777-1234 • Toll-free: 800-624-6553

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