

# ECZEMA (ATOPIC DERMATITIS)

## What Is It?

The word *eczema* refers to certain kinds of dermatitis, or inflamed skin. Eczema is an inherited condition characterized by:

- Red, extremely itchy skin
- Often starts on the cheeks at 2 to 6 months of age
- Most common on creases of elbows, wrists, and knees
- Neck, ankles, and feet may be involved
- Rash is raw and weepy when scratched
- Constant dry skin

Persons with asthma or hay fever or with a family history of eczema are more likely to have eczema themselves. Flare-ups may be brought on by contact with irritating substances (such as soap or chlorine) or certain foods.

Eczema is a chronic condition, although it usually improves in childhood or young adulthood. Early and regular treatment can relieve itching and also may reduce the severity and duration of the disease.

## Home Treatment

### STEROID CREAMS

This is the primary treatment used for eczema. Use as directed by your health care provider. Once the rash has quieted down, use it once per day for 2 more weeks. After that, it may be used immediately on any spot that itches. Be sure to always have some on hand.

### BATHING AND HYDRATING THE SKIN

Water-soaked skin is far less itchy, so daily bathing is important. Small children should be cleaned without soap, because eczema is very sensitive to soaps. Teenagers must use some soap, however—particularly under the arms, on the genital area, and the feet. A nondrying soap such as Dove should be used. Keep the eczema free from shampoo.

### LUBRICATING CREAM

Eczema always results in dry skin. Apply an outer layer of lubricating cream (Keri, Lubriderm, Nivea, NutriDerm) cream to the entire skin surface while it is still damp after a bath. The cream should be applied after the steroid cream. Do not use ointments, petroleum jelly, or vegetable shortening; these block the sweat glands, which can cause itching and make the rash worse. Ointment may be necessary, however, in severe cases of eczema.

### ITCHING

Apply steroid cream at the first sign of itching. Keep fingernails cut short, and wash the child's hands frequently to avoid infecting the rash.

## Prevention

Eczema can be worsened by irritating factors such as woolen clothing or any clothing made of scratchy, rough material, tight clothing, and even dust and dust-catching objects. Try to avoid the following, which can be triggers that cause eczema to flare up:

- Excessive heat
- Sweating
- Excessive cold
- Dry air (use a humidifier)
- Chlorine
- Harsh chemicals
- Soaps, bubble bath
- Grass during grass pollen season (May and June)
- People with fever blisters

During the first year of life, avoid:

- Cow's milk products
- Soy
- Eggs
- Peanut butter
- Wheat
- Fish

## Call Your Health Care Provider

### **IMMEDIATELY IF**

The rash appears to be infected and is accompanied by a fever

The rash flares up after contact with someone with fever blisters (herpes)

### **WITHIN 24 HOURS IF**

The rash becomes raw and bleeding in several places

The rash becomes infected (you see pus or soft yellow scabs)

### **DURING REGULAR HOURS IF**

The rash has not improved after 7 days of treatment

Itching interferes with sleep

You have other concerns or questions