

Eczema (Atopic Dermatitis)

Description

- red, extremely itchy rash
- often starts on the cheeks at 2 to 6 months of age
- most common on flexor surfaces (creases) of elbows, wrists, and knees
- occasionally on neck, ankles, and feet if scratched, rash becomes raw and weepy
- constantly dry skin.

Cause

Eczema is an inherited type of sensitive, dry skin. A personal history of asthma or hay fever or a family history of eczema makes it more likely that your child has eczema. Flare-ups occur when there is contact with irritating substances (for example, soap or chlorine).

In 30% of infants with eczema, certain foods cause the eczema to flare up. If you suspect a particular food item (for example, cow's milk, eggs, or peanut butter) is causing your child's flare-ups, feed that food to your child one time (a "challenge") after avoiding it for 2 weeks. If the food is causing flare-ups, the eczema should become itchy or develop hives within 2 hours of eating the food. If this occurs, avoid ever giving this food to your child and talk to your physician about food substitutes.

Expected Course

This is a chronic condition and will usually not go away before adolescence. The goal is control, not cure. The early treatment of any itching can help prevent a severe rash.

Home Treatment

- 1. Steroid creams.** Steroid creams are the main treatment of the itch of eczema. Apply this cream to any spot that itches. Also use it for mild flare-ups. After the rash quiets down, use it for an additional week. When you travel with your child, always take the steroid cream with you. If it starts to run out, buy some more or get the prescription refilled.
- 2. Hydrating the skin.** Hydration of the skin followed by lubricating cream is the main way to prevent flare-ups of eczema. Your child should have one bath a day for 10 minutes. Water-soaked skin is far less itchy. Eczema is very sensitive to soap especially bubble bath. Young children can usually be cleaned without any soap. Teenagers need a soap to wash under the arms, the genital area, and the feet. They can use a nondrying soap such as Dove for these areas. Keep shampoo off the eczema.

- 3. Lubricating cream.** Apply a lubricating cream once daily (twice a day during the winter) every day. Some lubricating creams are Keri, Lubriderm, Nivea, and Nutraderm. Children with eczema always have dry skin. After a 10-minute bath, the skin is hydrated and feels good. Help trap the moisture in the skin by applying an outer layer of lubricating cream to the entire skin surface while it is damp (within 3 minutes of leaving the bath). Apply it after you have put steroid cream on any itchy areas. Avoid applying any ointments, petroleum jelly, or vegetable shortening because they can block the sweat glands, increase the itching, and worsen the rash (especially in warm weather). Also, soap is needed to wash them off. For severe eczema, ointments may be needed temporarily to heal the skin.
- 4. Itching.** At the first sign of any itching, apply the steroid cream to the area that itches. Keep your child's fingernails cut short. Also, wash your child's hands with water frequently to avoid infecting the eczema.
- 5. Antihistamine Medicine.** An antihistamine is needed at bedtime for itching that is keeping your child from getting to sleep or causes your child to wake up during the night.

Prevention

Wool fibers and clothes made of other scratchy, rough materials make eczema worse. Cotton clothes should be worn as much as possible. Avoid triggers that cause eczema to flare up, such as excessive heat, sweating, excessive cold, dry air (use a humidifier), chlorine, harsh chemicals, and soaps. Never use bubble bath. Also, keep your child off the grass during grass pollen season (May and June). Keep your child away from anyone with fever blisters since the herpesvirus can cause a serious skin infection in children with eczema.

Try to breast-feed all high-risk infants. Otherwise, use a soy formula. Also try to avoid cow's milk products, soy, eggs, peanut butter, wheat, and fish during your infant's first year.

Call Your Child's Physician Immediately If:

- The rash looks infected and your child has a fever.
- The rash flares up after contact with fever blisters.

Call Your Child's Physician During Office Hours If:

- The rash becomes raw and open in several places.
- The rash looks infected (red streaks, pus, and yellow scabs).
- The rash hasn't greatly improved in 7 days of treatment.
- You have other concerns or questions.