

# Eczema

***“He draws up the drops of water, which distill as rain to the streams; the clouds pour down their moisture and abundant showers fall on mankind.” Job 36: 27, 28***

Eczema, known in medical circles as atopic dermatitis, affects about 15 million people in the United States alone, and is the most common skin condition seen here. One in ten infants will develop eczema, although most symptoms will disappear in the first few months after birth, and will completely resolve by age five. It is usually seen as itchy, inflamed skin, and generally people with eczema have allergies, hay fever, and possibly asthma, too. Eczema tends to run in families. Living in a dry climate or in a city increases the chances of developing eczema. While it is not contagious, there is no actual cure either. Eczema is sometimes referred to as “the itch that rashes” because when the itchy area is scratched, a rash then follows. It may appear as a small rash, or it might spread to a wider area and actually cause the skin to split. Often, people (especially children) scratch the involved area when they are asleep, and this makes the condition worse, which in turn increases the itching! It’s a vicious circle, but prompt, vigilant treatment will greatly reduce the severity of the condition. Dermatologists are the specialists most qualified to treat this condition. The diagnosis is made based on signs and symptoms, and on family and personal history. There is no actual test that can diagnose eczema. However, the source of the allergen, or irritant, causing the symptoms can be identified with allergy testing. Treatment is two-fold. First, factors that aggravate the eczema need to be eliminated. Sometimes that step alone will control the symptoms.

Common irritants include: soaps and detergents, perfumes and cosmetics, wool or synthetic fibers, dust, dust mites, or sand, cigarette smoke, and pool chlorine.

Other things that may make the condition worse: excessive bathing, lack of humidity in the air, emotional stress, and foods (mostly in children).

The second part of treatment involves the rash itself, which is combated by holding moisture in the skin. Emollients such as Eucerin, Cetaphil, and Nutraderm are often helpful. Ointments like petroleum jelly also may be recommended. These work best when applied right after bathing—within the first minute before moisture begins to evaporate. They may need to be reapplied up to four times a day. Newer products like Protopic and Elidel are especially good for sensitive areas such as the face and groin. A steroid cream or pill may be prescribed for severe flare-ups, but must be used for a short time only to prevent side effects. Antihistamines are often used to control the itching, and therefore the scratching that exacerbates the condition. Cold, wet wraps can help with intense itching. Ultraviolet light can be helpful, but it is expensive and increases a user’s risk for skin cancer.

Avoid any rubbing, peeling, microdermabrasion, and exfoliating—these actions all make dry skin drier. Use a mild cleanser, and only the fingertips to smooth it on and off. In general, control of eczema involves seeing a dermatologist for an evaluation and treatment plan, making lifestyle changes to prevent flare-ups, and using medications as prescribed. Since there is no cure, the goal is to control the symptoms.

For more information, check out: <http://www.skincarephysicians.com> or <http://www.kidshealth.org>

Blessings,  
Nurse Karen