



Eczema

PATIENT EDUCATION SERIES

What is eczema?

Eczema is a skin problem that causes itching, dryness, fine scales or flaking, and sometimes mild redness. Eczema can be a mild skin irritation that does not need medical treatment. Sometimes, however, it causes relentless itching and scratching. The skin may become scaly, raw, or thickened from constant or repeated bouts of eczema. This more severe form of eczema, called atopic dermatitis, may always be present or may appear just in certain seasons or with stress. Atopic dermatitis usually appears first in childhood or early adulthood.

How does it occur?

The cause of eczema is unclear. Often the tendency for severe eczema seems to be inherited along with asthma or hay fever/allergies. Aggravating factors that may cause eczema to flare up include: dry environments, heat, perspiration, rapid temperature changes, emotional stress, exposure to irritating chemicals or cleaning solutions, soaps, detergents, perfumes, wool, or synthetic fibers, dust, sand, and cigarette smoke.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptom of mild eczema is an area of fine, dry scales, often on the arms or legs. The skin may or may not itch. Severe eczema causes intense itching. The most common areas of itching are the fronts of the elbows, backs of the knees, and face. However, any area of skin may be affected. The skin may be sensitive to scratchy fabrics, especially wool. Eczema often becomes worse in the winter, when indoor air is very dry.

How is it diagnosed?

Your medical provider will examine your skin. S/he will examine your skin and will ask you about your medical history of rashes and about other problems such as allergies or asthma.

How is it treated?

Keeping the skin well moisturized is very important in avoiding and treating eczema flares. Use creams or ointments (emollients) as they have higher oil content than lotions. Lotions may actually cause a flare of eczema due to their high water content and lower oil content.

Use a humidifier in your room when the air is dry.

To prevent your skin from becoming too dry, avoid exposing your skin to a lot of water. This seems surprising, but in fact, every time the skin gets wet, evaporation of water from the skin dries the skin even more. For this reason, if you have severe eczema you should avoid prolonged water exposure. Very hot water dries out the skin. Take shorter, cooler showers using a non-soap cleanser like Cetaphil or a very gentle soap like Dove or Tone. Gently dry off. While the skin is still slightly damp, apply emollient to seal in the layer of moisture next to the skin. Frequent use of moisturizing cream or ointment is recommended.

Mild eczema sometimes does not need any treatment beyond maintaining skin moisturization, e.g. avoiding over-drying. Or it may go away if you put 1% hydrocortisone cream on the area a few times a day. No prescription is needed for this cream.

More severe eczema can be more difficult to treat. However, medicines such as antihistamines and steroid creams can help prevent or control the itching.

Antihistamine pills can usually prevent the itching of severe eczema. Many antihistamines cause drowsiness, so you may want to take the medicine only at bedtime. (It is important to prevent scratching during sleep.) Some antihistamines are available that do not cause drowsiness. These non-sedating antihistamines are more expensive, but they can be taken day or night to prevent itching.

Steroid creams or ointments can help control the itching and rash caused by severe eczema. Use these medications exactly as prescribed by your medical provider for the best results. Steroid creams and ointments come in many different strengths. Some should be used just once a day, some 4 times a day. Do not use them more often than recommended. Serious complications can develop from overuse of steroid medications. Use of steroid creams and ointments can be minimized by keeping your skin well lubricated.

Newer skin treatments for eczema include tacrolimus (Protopic) and pimecrolimus (Elidel). These do not work as quickly as topical steroids, but are effective when topical steroids have failed. Occasionally, oral steroids (prednisone) may be used to control a severe flare of eczema.