



## **Eczema is a Relatively Common Problem**

from [www.kidsgrowth.com](http://www.kidsgrowth.com)

Eczema is probably the most common pediatric skin disease seen by physicians, affecting about 3% of children. This condition is also known as atopic dermatitis and shares several features with asthma and allergic rhinitis (hay fever). They are all considered allergic illnesses with strong family tendencies, and children with eczema frequently have problems with the other two allergic conditions. While eczema can start anytime from infancy to young adulthood, ninety-five percent of youngsters begin having symptoms by the age of five.

Almost any part of the skin surface with the exception of protected areas, such as the diaper region, can be involved. When the disease starts in infancy, the rash tends to be localized on the face and scalp. In older children, the skin lesions usually occur on the chest, large folds of the extremities, the elbow creases and behind the knees. Although these are the most common sites, other areas can also be affected.

The main problem in eczema is that the skin loses water and dries out causing intense itching. If the child would not scratch, the skin would probably show little or no changes (a frequent description of eczema is that it is "the itch that rashes"). The scratching is most severe at night and the skin becomes raw and may begin to ooze. Eczema appears in cycles, and when the youngster is symptom free, the skin becomes thickened and leathery.

Unfortunately, the allergens or irritants that trigger an episode of eczema are difficult to track down. Some known aggravating factors include:

- The frequent use of soaps and other cleansing products that tend to remove natural oil from the skin
- Direct contact with animals (especially their saliva or fur) and indirect contact with animal dander.
- Rapid changes of temperature and humidity. Many children with eczema are worse during the wintertime when the air is relatively drier. On the other hand, some youngsters get worse when they sweat during the summertime.
- Rough, scratchy, or tight clothing, especially clothes made of wool or stiff fabrics.
- Emotional upset can trigger a episode of eczema.
- The child's diet as a trigger is a controversial subject among physicians who care for youngsters. The most common foods accused of triggering a bout of eczema are cow's milk, wheat, citrus, egg white, peanuts and fish. Parents should not avoid these foods unless they are sure that the food caused the eczema to flare up.

One of the biggest problems facing children with eczema is that their skin is very dry. This can be corrected by soaking the affected area in a basin, bath, or shower for 15-20 minutes a day without using

any soap or soap substitute. After taking the child out of the water immediately apply a good lubricating cream

(examples: Aquaphor, Eucerin, Moisturel, etc.). Lubricate the skin frequently the rest of the day.

Itching is usually the most aggravating of all eczema symptoms. Some relief may be provided by over the counter antihistamines used on a regular basis. If nighttime scratching is severe, the child's physician may prescribe a stronger medication and the occasional side effect of drowsiness is a bonus at night. Scratching can be minimized by keeping the fingernails short and using cotton gloves at night. For infants and younger children, knee-high socks are better than gloves, because they are harder to accidentally pull off during sleep.

Topical steroid ointments and creams are frequently used to treat flare ups of eczema. Steroids are potent drugs that when used topically keep down the inflammation and itching. They should be applied immediately after a bath to increase their uptake by the skin. However, these medications can cause significant side effects if used over a long period of time and should be administered only on the advice of the child's physician. In addition, oral antibiotics are often necessary to treat infection caused by bacteria that invade the skin because of damage due to scratching.

Formula fed infants occasionally benefit from a change in the type of formula. In older youngsters, eliminating a suspected food for a week or so occasionally reduces symptoms. To avoid malnutrition, however, parents should consult their child's physician before making any dietary changes.

Eczema is a common skin disease occurring mainly in children from infancy to young adulthood. Most children "outgrow" their eczema, but up to 50% of patients continue to have symptoms as adults. While eczema can be a difficult disorder to live with, the child's physician or a dermatologist can offer suggestions to help alleviate many of its symptoms. The goal in treatment is to control the skin changes so that eczema becomes a minor irritation rather than a major problem.