

Eczema/Atopic Dermatitis

What is eczema?

Eczema is a common inflammatory skin condition that makes skin dry, itchy, and flaky. It can appear as a rash that may look scaly, crusty, red, blistered, darkened, or thickened.

What causes eczema?

The exact cause is not entirely understood, but there are many known risk factors. People who have asthma and/or allergies or a family history of any of these conditions can be more prone to eczema. Environmental factors can also cause or exacerbate the symptoms, including:

- Extreme hot or cold temperatures
- rough /scratchy clothing
- Scented products including certain soaps, lotions, perfumes, bubble bath
- Castile soap/ Dr. Bronner's
- Some laundry detergents, fabric softeners, and dryer sheets
- Food allergies, such as to milk, nuts, soy, wheat, fish, and some others
- Chemical exposures/industrial agents or cleaning products
- Frequent bathing
- Stress

Will it ever go away?

While there is no cure, taking gentle care of your skin and keeping it well hydrated can usually control the symptoms. Non-prescription antihistamines like Loratadine (Claritin), Fexofenadine (Allegra), or Diphenhydramine (Benadryl) can decrease itching. You can also purchase without a prescription hydrocortisone 1% which can help reduce inflammation and itching. For people with moderate to severe symptoms, higher potency steroid creams may be prescribed for flare ups. For those with very severe symptoms, other treatments, such as bleach baths or light therapy performed at a dermatology office may be helpful.

What is "gentle" skin care?

- Avoid prolonged exposure to hot water. Keep showers and baths to only a few minutes per day and do not use hot tubs, saunas, or steam rooms. Showers and baths should be in lukewarm water that is not too hot or cold.
- Use an unscented, mild soap/cleanser like Dove bar soap, Aveeno, or Cetaphil. When you can, avoid the areas where you are experiencing inflammation unless soiled, oily or you notice an odor.
- Immediately after bathing, dry off your skin lightly with a towel and apply an unscented, emollient cream to your whole body. Cerave, Aveeno, Cetaphil, and Eucerin are good choices. Avoid products that contain perfumes, lanolin, or alcohol.
- Use hypoallergenic, scent-free laundry detergent, and avoid fabric softeners and dryer sheets.
- Use a humidifier in your bedroom at night.

- Drink plenty of water to stay hydrated from the inside out. Keep in mind that alcohol and caffeine can dry you out.
- Avoid scrubbing or scratching your skin.
- Wear protective gloves, ideally cotton-lined rubber gloves, for “wet work”, such as gardening, doing the dishes, or using cleaning products

When to check with your healthcare provider

- If your rash is spreading or getting worse
- If you are unable to control your symptoms
- If signs of an infection develop, such as worsening redness or the onset of pain, bleeding, swelling or pus in the affected area.

Topical Steroids

The most commonly prescribed medications for eczema are topical steroids. These work by suppressing the local inflammation in the skin. Since steroids are available in a variety of potencies, your healthcare provider will prescribe one that is appropriate for the nature of your condition, your age, and the area of your body that is affected. Your doctor may prescribe more than one of different potencies for you to apply to different body regions, as some places (e.g. the face, the groin and under the arms or breasts) are more prone to side effects than others. When used correctly, topical steroids rarely cause significant side effects. However, used for excessive periods, they may cause changes to the treated skin, including thinning, bruising, stretch marks, folliculitis and pimples, loss of skin pigment, and hair growth at the site of application.

For some patients with severe eczema, bleach baths are recommended. *Do not take bleach baths unless you have been advised to by your primary care provider or dermatologist.*

Bleach Bath Directions

Add ½ cup household bleach to a bathtub full of lukewarm water and soak for 10 minutes. Do not submerge your head. Rinse off completely with warm water and pat dry. Proceed with regular moisturizing routine. Can be repeated twice a week or every three to four days.

For an appointment visit www.uhs.berkeley.edu or call 510-642-2000
Clinic Nurse 510-643-7197 for advice