

Eczema (Atopic Dermatitis)

What is eczema

When a child has eczema their skin is red, dry, itchy and scaly. The skin may crack, weep, bleed and sometimes become infected.

Eczema occurs in 15% - 20% of infants and young children. It usually improves as children grow older. A small number of adults will continue to have eczema. Eczema cannot be cured but it can be treated and managed.

What triggers Eczema?

- Heat** - increases the itch. Hot baths, air blowing heaters and travelling long distances in a hot car will also make eczema worse
- Clothes** – such as wool and acrylic will scratch the skin and may lead to overheating
- Bathing** – soap, shampoos and bubble baths thin and dry the skin
- Irritants** – washing powder, chlorine in pools, sand, perfumed moisturisers, baby wipes, and chemicals may dry and irritate the skin
- Allergens** – house dust mite, moulds, grasses, pollens, foods and pets may trigger and/or make eczema worse
- Other** – teething, viral illnesses

How to avoid triggers

- know your child's eczema triggers
- dress in cotton or soft fabrics and a couple of thin layers which can be easily removed
- avoid sheepskins, fluffy toys, woollen blankets and carpets
- cut tags off clothes and avoid clothes which are tight and/or scratch or irritate the skin
- avoid long car trips and use air-conditioning to cool the car. Dress in cool clothes for car trips
- wash clothes in pure soap flakes or low phosphate liquid detergent

What to do

- heat, dryness and prickle make eczema worse
- keep child cool and moisturized and use light and loose cotton clothing and blankets
- bath once a day in a warm bath with a non-soap cleanser or bath oil
- apply moisturisers twice a day even when eczema is under control. This will help to maintain the skin barrier and reduce itch and irritation
- moisturisers may be lotions, creams or ointments
- creams are normally used, as lotions are absorbed quickly and may not provide enough oil. If skin is dry, use thick creams containing white and/or soft paraffin
- ointments are more effective than creams on very dry skin but they are hard to rub in and can leave the skin feeling greasy. If skin is very dry and looks like it might flare, use greasy creams

How to use creams

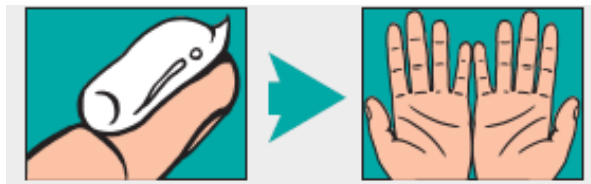
- creams should be scooped out with a spoon or spatula, not hands
- moisturisers should be applied in the direction of the hair to avoid clogging of hair follicles
- pots and jars of moisturisers should not be left open

Corticosteroid creams and ointments

- when the skin is red and inflamed your doctor may order corticosteroid creams and ointments
- these come in different strengths, weak strengths can be purchased over the counter at your pharmacy
- stronger strengths will be prescribed by your doctor
- weak corticosteroids cream such as, hydrocortisone are used on the face, behind the knees, elbows, and in body folds
- corticosteroid creams and ointments should be applied to red areas once or twice a day and stopped when eczema improves
- moisturisers can be applied over the top of corticosteroids and to other areas of the body where the skin is dry

How to use corticosteroids

The fingertip unit is often used as a guide to how much corticosteroid should be applied. One finger tip unit is the amount of ointment that will fit between the fingertip and the first bend in the finger. This will cover an area the size of two adult hands.



Wet dressings

- if the skin is red and itching and not improving with moisturisers and corticosteroid creams, wet dressings may be applied to the arms and legs
- wet dressings reduce the itch, rehydrate the skin with moisturisers and protect the skin from scratching
- do not apply to the face or neck

How to apply a wet dressing

- soak disposable towels or tubular elastic bandages in warm water
- wring bandages out until just damp
- apply moisturisers and corticosteroid creams to the body as required
- then wrap wet dressings around the affected areas
- cover wet dressings with crepe bandages firmly but not tightly, or a dry layer of tubular elastic bandage
- remove dressings when they dry out

Skin infections – Signs of bacterial or fungal infections on the skin include weeping, oozing, crusting, pustules, fever or painful swelling. If this occurs, consult your doctor immediately. Your doctor may order oral antibiotics or antifungal creams.

When to see your doctor

You should see your doctor:-

- if your child's eczema is not getting better with treatment;
- there are signs of a bacterial or fungal infection;
- if your child develops cold sores; or
- you are worried about your child's eczema.

Action Plan for Eczema - Ask your doctor to complete an Action Plan for Eczema. Action Plans and Care Plans for Eczema can be found on the ASCIA website at www.allergy.org.au/content/view/345/284/

Useful Websites

Australasian Society of Clinical Immunologists and Allergy inc. (ASCIA)

<http://www.allergy.org.au/content/view/173/148/>

Eczema Association of Australasia Inc - <http://www.eczema.org.au/info/facts.html>

New Zealand Dermatological Society Inc - <http://www.dermnetnz.org/dermatitis/treatment.html>

Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne - http://www.rch.org.au/derm/eczema.cfm?doc_id=4596

Sydney Children's Hospital - <http://www.sch.edu.au>

UK National Eczema Society - <http://www.eczema.org/index.php>

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