

Eczema (Atopic Dermatitis)

Definition

- Eczema is a chronic dry skin disease with recurrent flare-ups of severe itching
- The rash is red and itchy

Health Information

Symptoms

- The main symptom is itching. If it doesn't itch, it's not eczema.
- With flare-ups (itching attacks), the rash becomes red or even raw and weepy.
- Onset: Average onset at 3 months old. Range: 1-6 months old. Usually begins by 2 years old.
- Location: Classic eczema starts on the cheeks at 1 to 6 months of age. It can spread to the rest of the face. In infants, the outer surfaces of the arms and legs also become involved.
- In older children, eczema is found in the joint creases. The elbows, wrists, and knees are the most common places.
- The rash is usually the same on both sides of the body.

Cause

- A type of dry, sensitive skin that's inherited.
- Flare-ups are from skin contact with soap, shampoo, pollen or other irritating substances.
- About 30% of babies with severe eczema also have food allergies. The most common is cow's milk.
- Over 10% of children have eczema. It's the most common skin condition of the first 10 years.

Prevention - Avoid Triggers of Eczema Flare-Ups

- **Soaps.** Never use bubble bath. It can cause a major flare-up.
- **Pollens.** Keep your child from lying on the grass during grass pollen season.
- **Animals.** Avoid any animals that make the rash worse.
- **Foods.** If certain foods cause severe itching (flares), avoid them.
- **Wool.** Avoid wool fibers and clothes made of other scratchy, rough materials.
- **Dry Air.** Use a humidifier if the air in your home is dry.
- **Caution:** Keep your child away from anyone with fever blisters (cold sores). The herpes virus can cause a serious skin infection in children with eczema.
- Don't worry about which detergent you use to wash clothing.

Care Advice

1. Overview:

- Eczema is a chronic skin disease. So, you need to learn how to control it.
- Itching attacks (flare-ups) are to be expected.
- The goal is to treat all flare-ups quickly and vigorously. (Reason: To prevent skin damage)
- Here is some care advice that should help.

2. **Treatment Based on Severity of Eczema:**
 - Mild Eczema: Just need moisturizer cream and to avoid flare-up triggers
 - Moderate Eczema: Also needs steroid cream and bedtime allergy medicine
 - Severe Eczema: Also may need oral antibiotics (usually for 2 weeks). Several new prescription medicines can bring most severe eczema under control. Discuss with your doctor.
3. **Steroid Cream or Ointment (Rescue Medicine):**
 - Itchy skin is the main symptom of eczema.
 - Steroid creams or ointments are essential for controlling red, itchy skin.
 - Apply steroid creams only to itchy or red spots (not to the normal skin).
 - Most children have 2 types of steroid creams. (1) A mild steroid cream to treat any pink spots or mild itching. This is often 1% hydrocortisone cream. No prescription is needed. (2) Another stronger cream to treat any spots with severe itching. This is a prescription steroid cream such as Synalar. Never apply this stronger cream to the face.
 - Apply these creams as directed or 2 times per day.
 - After the rash quiets down, apply it once per day. After 1 week just use moisturizing cream.
4. **Moisturizing Creams or Ointment (Controller Medicine):**
 - All children with eczema have dry sensitive skin.
 - The skin needs a moisturizing cream applied once or twice daily. Examples: Cetaphil cream.
 - Apply the creams after a 5 or 10-minute bath. To trap moisture in the skin, apply the cream while skin is still damp. Do this within 3 minutes of leaving the bath or shower.
 - The steroid cream should be applied to any itchy spots first. Then use the moisturizing cream as the top layer.
 - While most parents prefer creams, moisturizing ointments are sometimes needed in the winter. Examples are Vaseline and Aquaphor.
 - Caution: Never stop the moisturizing cream. Reason: The rash will come back.
5. **Bathing - Avoid Soaps:**
 - Give one bath a day for 10 minutes in lukewarm water. Reason: Water-soaked skin feels less itchy. Follow the bath with a moisturizing cream to all the skin.
 - Avoid all soaps. Reason: Eczema is very sensitive to soaps, especially bubble bath. There is no safe soap for young children with eczema. They can be cleaned using warm water.
6. **Allergy Medicine:**
 - Some children with eczema need an allergy medicine by mouth at bedtime. Reason: Scratching in bed can cause severe skin breakdown. It may also interfere with falling asleep.
 - Give the medicine your child's doctor suggested.
 - If none was suggested try Benadryl at bedtime until you talk with your doctor. No prescription is needed. Age limit: 1 year and older.
7. **Itching Attack - Shower to Remove Irritants:**
 - Playing in the grass, being around animals, or swimming can cause increased itching.
 - For itching from these causes, give your child a quick shampoo and shower.
8. **Itching Attack - Treatment:**
 - At the first sign of any itching, use the steroid cream. Put it on the areas that itch. If unsure, apply 1% hydrocortisone cream. No prescription is needed.
 - Keep your child's fingernails cut short and smooth.
 - Ask older children to try not to itch, but never punish for itching.
 - For constant itching in young children, cover the hands with socks or gloves. Use for a day or until the itching is brought under control. Provide extra cuddling during this time.

9. **Expected Course:**

- Eczema is a chronic condition. After puberty, about half get over their eczema.
- Many children who have severe eczema as babies develop asthma and nasal allergies.

Call Your Doctor If

- Itching is not under control after 2 days of steroid cream
- Rash looks infected (spreading redness, yellow scabs or pus)
- You think your child needs to be seen
- Your child becomes worse

Pediatric Care Advice

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