

ECZEMA



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What is eczema?

Eczema is a particular type of inflammatory reaction in the skin. The features include redness, scaling and itch. When it is more severe the skin will weep and become crusted.

Eczema can be produced on everyone's skin but some people have much more sensitive skin than others. A tendency to having sensitive skin can run in the family, just like many other attributes such as height, complexion and colour of eyes. More than 1 in 5 children will suffer some form of eczema at some stage of their life.

There are many different triggers for eczema and the triggers are very individual- what triggers one child's eczema may be completely different to the triggers of another child.

How do I manage eczema?

There are 2 main aspects to managing eczema:

Identify the triggers. Most of the time eczema is multifactorial- that is, there are many causes all contributing concurrently. It is often the case that there are triggers that alone will not cause eczema but added to other triggers will be enough to cause eczema to flare. It is therefore important to be very thorough in addressing as many potential triggers at the same time.

Settling the eczema. There is a vicious cycle when eczema is present on the skin. The natural barrier is disturbed and the skin then becomes far more sensitive than to begin with. Things that would not normally flare the eczema will start to, and scratching will also make it worse. It therefore is important to settle the eczema to not only make your child more comfortable but also to restore the integrity of the skin.

Eczema triggers.

There are many potential triggers and every child is different with what causes their eczema. Common triggers for eczema include:

***Dryness.** Generally children with sensitive skin will have a tendency for it to become dry. The dryness can lead to small microscopic breaks in the skin and when this occurs eczema will develop. It is therefore important to:

- Use a regular moisturizer. Moisturizers are not treatments for eczema but treatments for dryness. They should be applied all over as part of the daily skin care regimen whether the skin is good, bad or indifferent. The type of moisturizer and frequency of application will depend on how dry the skin naturally is and also personal preference.
- Use plain Bath oil in the bath.
- Avoid topical preparations that are drying. These include alcohol based solutions, calamine lotion, powders etc.

***Irritation.** Everyone could develop eczema with enough irritation to the skin but for those who have sensitive skin, small amounts of irritation will contribute towards the development of eczema

Common irritants include:

- Water. When water evaporates from the skin it will irritate slightly. Moisturizers will minimize this impact but try to avoid unnecessary and repeated water exposure.
- Saliva. For children at an age with regular dribbling, a thicker barrier preparation applied regularly around the mouth can help.
- Soaps and bubble baths. There are many “soap alternatives” or “wash” products available which do not irritate.
- Shampoo. Shampoos are detergents and will strip the skin of natural oils. Most children do not need shampoo (they can use a “wash” product on their hair) and if they are to be shampooed, this should not be in the bath.
- Harsh fabrics. Cotton is always soft and wool is always considered to be harsh when directly against the skin. For other fabrics, if it feels soft and breathable it is OK; if it feels harsh, rough or crinkly it is best avoided.

- Seams and tags. These can often irritate sensitive skin and so during the winter it is best to have the first clothing layer on inside-out so they are not directly against the skin. Try to avoid embroidered emblems against the skin.
- Sand and chlorine. These can irritate the skin so make sure that the skin is moisturized after swimming (and before if very dry skin) and sand is brushed off the skin.
- Antiseptics. These can be at times extremely irritating to the skin.
- “Additives” to creams. The more ingredients a cream has, the more chance there will be a product that could irritate the skin and worsen the eczema. Try to keep creams very bland with few ingredients and without fragrance. “Natural” products such as essential oils and plant extracts can be very irritating to the skin (and have no proven benefit).

***Overheating.** Except for newborns, most babies and children will need the **same or fewer** clothing and bedding layers as older children and adults. Particularly if your child has eczema in the “hotter zones” such as behind the knees, in front of the elbows and under the nappy line, they may be being overheated.

Therefore:

- Avoid dressing in multiple layers and thick sleeping bags.
- Keep bath temperature to more like a warm heated swimming pool rather than a hot spa.
- Be aware if they are very flushed or sweating.
- It is false that you can catch a cold from being too cold.

***Infection.** Infection is primarily a complication of eczema. Anytime when the skin is broken down, there is a chance of bacterial infection. However, once present on the skin, it will make the eczema worse and therefore needs to be addressed. This means that for some children with difficult to control eczema, infection can be recurrent and intermittent antibiotics will be required. Clues to infection include sudden worsening with crusting and pain rather than itch.

***Food allergy.** For some children, food allergy can be the most relevant trigger for their eczema but for others it is not relevant at all. Highest suspicion is with very young babies with widespread eczema. As a general rule, one does not grow into food allergies- that is, if certain foods were once tolerated, allergy to these foods will not occur. There are many and potentially multiple foods that can be relevant and it is unwise to take upon a significantly restricted diet without adequate assessment and dietary guidance. The most appropriate form of allergy assessment is with skin prick testing or a blood test known as an IgE RAST test.

***Food intolerance.** Sometimes the acidic chemicals within certain foods can aggravate eczema. This is most usually seen in the setting of stubborn eczema around the lips and neck of young children. The reaction is not an allergy and therefore there is no test that can be done to determine if this is relevant for your child. It seems to depend on the quantity and concentration of the food consumed and therefore can be difficult to correlate all the time with certain foods. Acidic foods such as tomatoes and tomato sauces, citrus fruits and juices, strawberries, artificial colours and flavours and highly preserved meats seem to be the common culprits when relevant. Trial and error is all that can be done to determine if pertinent to your child's eczema.

***Environmental allergy.** Allergy to airborne substances in the environment such as dust mites, animal dander and grass pollen is extremely common in the community. Sometimes this can be a contributing factor with regards to eczema but it is always difficult to assess the degree of relevance as so many people will have a positive allergy test to these agents without any problems at all. If eczema is very bad around the eyelids, forehead and other exposed areas, this is more likely to be a significant factor.

***Other triggers.** It is certainly possible for viral infections, other skin conditions, chronic ill-health or stress to trigger eczema at times. There are many circumstances whereupon there is no obvious trigger and it is important to keep an open mind to any possibility.

Settling the eczema.

It is important to settle the eczema to not only make your child more comfortable but also to restore the integrity of the skin. It can be very difficult to determine which underlying factors are relevant without a good “baseline” of clear skin. The commonest, simplest and safest way of achieving this is with topical steroid creams (refer to Figure 1). With regards to steroid creams:

- They are much safer than their reputation suggests. One would have to cover the entire skin surface day after day for months to be concerned about “too much” getting into the body.
- They are very similar to what is produced naturally by our adrenal glands every day.
- It is important to clear the eczema rather than just relieve it temporarily.
- Once the eczema has cleared completely, cease the application. The aim is to be in the situation where upon the eczema is then controlled without having to rely on the cortisone creams regularly for the longer term.

There are other creams, medicines and techniques that can be utilized to settle eczema and these may be discussed by your doctor depending on the severity of the eczema.

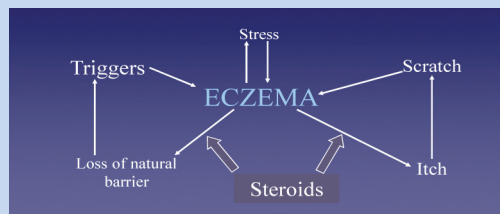


Figure 1.

Steroid creams settle itch and help restore the natural barrier of the skin. This can help break the 'vicious cycle' of eczema.

This is a guide to the relevance of various triggers to you/your child's eczema at present:

	Unlikely	Possibly	Likely	Highly Likely
Dryness				
Irritation				
Overheating				
Infection				
Food allergy				
Food Intolerance				
Enviromental allergy				
Other				
The eczema needs to be settled more aggressively				

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