



fact sheet

Eczema

Eczema (also known as dermatitis) is the name for a group of diseases that are the result of inflammation of the skin. The inflammation is a reaction of the immune system to a complex series of factors. These include the genes you inherit and external elements such as the climate and the food you eat. There are many different forms of eczema; they can affect any age group, and their pattern and severity differs from individual to individual.

Eczematous skin tends to be red and scaly, sometimes with small blisters. It is intensely itchy and scratching can cause bleeding and infection.

Eczema is the commonest type of skin disease seen by doctors, and according to The National Eczema Society as many as one in twelve adults and one in five children suffer from eczema. Here is some brief information about some of the more common types of eczema.

Atopic Eczema

Atopic eczema is thought to be hereditary as there is often a family history of atopic allergy (eczema, asthma or hayfever). Approximately 60% of sufferers develop atopic eczema before the age of one year but fortunately most grow out of it by the age of 16. However the inherited tendency to eczema never goes away and it can return in later life. The natural course of the disease is that it flares up and then dies down from one week to the next, often affecting the wrists, ankles and behind the knees. The intense itch disturbs sleep and results in skin damage by scratching which can lead to secondary bacterial infection. The aim of treatment is to stop the skin flaring and keep the condition under control.

Contact Dermatitis

There are two types of contact dermatitis - irritant contact dermatitis and allergic contact dermatitis. As the name suggests, the individual will have come into contact with external irritant which has caused the eczema. Allergic Contact Dermatitis generally develops over a long period of time as a result of regular contact with a substance. It is the body's immune system reacting against the substance that causes the eczema. Typical substances a person can become allergic to are perfume, make up, and the nickel in costume jewellery. Irritant Contact Dermatitis usually affects adults and is due to contact with irritants to the skin, commonly on the hands. Household detergents and chemicals used around the home or the work place are the main culprits. New mothers often develop this type of eczema; the arrival of a new baby inevitably leads to more frequent hand washing. Hair dressers are also prone because their hands are frequently in water and in contact with chemicals in shampoos and hair dyes.

Seborrhoeic Eczema

This can affect adults or babies. In babies it is more commonly referred to as cradle cap and can be found in the scalp and nappy areas. Unlike atopic eczema, although it looks bad, it is not sore or itchy and generally clears up from the age of one onwards. In adults, men are more susceptible; it usually affects the 20-40 year old age group. It causes redness and scaling of the skin. Dandruff is a mild form of seborrhoeic eczema. It can also involve the face, the eyelids and the eyebrows. This type of eczema is usually associated with yeast growth.

Varicose Eczema

This is more common in women than men and tends to develop in later life due to poor circulation. It may be associated with varicose veins. It affects the lower legs and ankles and leads to increased risk of ulceration in those areas.

Discoid Eczema

The cause of discoid eczema is unknown. It usually affects adults, often in later life. The affected skin appears like coin shaped red scaly patches usually on the lower legs.

Is eczema contagious?

No. Although eczema looks unpleasant, you cannot catch it or spread it by touching.

What causes eczema?

Eczema is a very complex condition and there is rarely one single cause for a person's eczema. It is usually a combination of the inherited tendency and a trigger factor. External trigger factors include house dust mites, contact with pets, climate, or the dyes in synthetic fibres. Stress, and occasionally diet can also have an effect.

Is there a cure?

Currently there is no cure for eczema, but by following a good skin routine with emollient and appropriate medical care the effects of eczema can be managed and controlled.

Eczema and itching

Eczema is an itchy condition as most parents who have a child with atopic eczema know only too well. This is because the inflammation in the skin irritates the nerve endings in the skin. The itch of eczema stops or goes down when the eczema is better.

Eczema and moisturisers

Skin moisturisers (or emollient) are used for many types of skin problems. However they play a very important part in managing atopic eczema. It is important that you avoid products that may irritate and dry the skin such as soaps, detergents, wool and extremes of temperature try and use a simple moisturiser. The smoothness and softness of the skin depends on the amount of water in the surface layer of the skin. This layer protects the rest of the skin from damage. In eczema, it is often broken, allowing moisture to escape and infections to enter through the skin. emollient protect the outer layer of your skin by covering it with a protective film. This keeps the water in the skin where it is needed and also helps to keep infections and other harsh substances out. They may also help eczema by dampening down inflammation which may in turn reduce the need for steroid creams.

How often can they be used?

Ideally, emollient should be used at least twice daily. By all means, use them more often than this, especially on exposed areas of the skin such as the hand and face during the day time. emollient should be applied to exposed areas of the skin before coming into contact with factors which might aggravate the eczema such as cold weather, swimming, wet/dusty activities at school/home such as painting or gardening. In babies, it is a good idea to protect the hands and cheeks with an emollient before mealtimes to prevent irritation from foods and drinks. It is a good idea to keep small pots/tubes of emollient at home, work and at school for regular use.

Other helpful information sites

www.talkeczema.com - patient support and information site for individuals and families living with the day to day misery of eczema.

www.eczema.org - the eczema society provide information and help for people suffering with eczema

www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk - telephone 0845 4647 to speak to an adviser or nurse

www.britishskinfoundation.org.uk - helpful advise on many different types of skin problems

Disclaimer

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Sources: talkeczema.com, [eczema society](http://eczema.org) and [the british skin foundation](http://thebritishskinfoundation.org.uk)