

Things to Know About Atopic Dermatitis (Eczema)

Definition

Atopic dermatitis (eczema) is an itchy inflammation of the skin and is usually a long-lasting (chronic) condition. Eczema is not an allergy itself, but allergies can trigger eczema. About 1 out of every 10 kids develops eczema. Symptoms typically appear within the first few months of life and almost always before a child turns five. The good news is that more than half of the kids who have eczema today will be over it by the time they're teenagers. **Eczema is not contagious and cannot be spread from one person to another.**

Causes

The exact cause of atopic dermatitis (eczema) is unknown, but is likely due to a combination of dry, irritated skin together with a malfunction in the body's immune system. It often occurs along with allergies or asthma and frequently runs in families.

Symptoms

- Extremely dry-looking skin
- Red to brownish-gray colored patches
- Itching, which may be severe, especially at night
- Small, raised bumps, which may leak fluid and crust over when scratched
- Thickened, cracked, or scaly skin
- Raw, sensitive skin from excessive scratching

Though the patches can occur anywhere, they most often appear on the hands and feet, in the front of the bend of the elbow, behind the knees, and on the ankles, wrists, face, neck and upper chest. It can also affect the skin around your eyes, including your eyelids. Symptoms also tend to worsen and improve over time, with flare-ups occurring periodically. Itching may be severe, and scratching the rash can make it worse. Breaking this itch-scratch cycle can be challenging.

Diagnosis

Diagnosing eczema can be challenging because:

- Each child experiences a unique combination of symptoms that also tend to vary in severity.
- It's sometimes confused with other skin conditions.
- There is no test available to diagnose it definitely.
- Eczema is typically diagnosed based on an examination of the skin and a review of medical history.

Treatments

- Over-the-counter anti-itch creams
- Soothing, non-scented and non-alcohol based lotions
- Prescription corticosteroid creams or ointments
- Antibiotics
- Oral antihistamines (Benadryl)
- Oral corticosteroids (i.e., Prednisone)
- Immunomodulators (i.e., Protopic and Elidel) [*The FDA has recommended that these prescription-only medications be used only when other treatments have failed, or if someone can't tolerate other treatments.*]

Helping Your Child

You can help prevent or treat eczema by keeping your child's skin from becoming dry or itchy and avoiding known triggers that cause flare-ups. Try to follow these self-care measures:

- Avoid giving your child frequent hot baths.
- Use warm water with mild soaps – sprinkle the bath water with baking soda or an oatmeal bath liquid.
- Avoid excessive scrubbing and toweling after bathing. Gently pat skin dry.
- Avoid wooly or coarse materials in clothes. Dress your child in soft breathable materials.
- Apply cool compresses (such as a wet, cool washcloth).
- Keep skin moisturized, especially after bathing.
- Keep fingernails trimmed short to minimize skin damage caused by scratching.
- Help your child avoid becoming overheated, which can lead to flare-ups.
- Eliminate any known allergies such as certain foods, dust, or pet dander from your household.
- Have your child drink plenty of water, which adds moisture to the skin.

When to Call the Doctor

Children and teens with eczema are prone to skin infections. Call your doctor immediately if you notice any of the early signs of skin infection, which may include:

- Increased fever
- Redness and warmth on or around affected areas
- Pus-filled bumps on or around affected areas
- Areas on the skin that look like cold sores or fever blisters
- If you notice a sudden change or worsening of the eczema or if it isn't responding to treatment

Taking some preventative precautions and following the doctor's orders can help in keeping your child's eczema under control.

Source: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/eczema/DS00986>

Additional Resource: http://kidshealth.org/parent/infections/skin/eczema_atopic_dermatitis.html#