

Eczema (Atopic Dermatitis)

What is eczema?

Eczema is an inherited type of sensitive, dry skin. Eczema often starts on the cheeks at 2 to 6 months of age. The rash is most commonly found in the creases of the elbows, wrists, and knees. Sometimes eczema also occurs on the neck, ankles, and feet. The rash is red and itchy. If scratched, the rash becomes raw and weepy.

What is the cause?

If your child has asthma or hay fever, or other family members have eczema, it is more likely that your child will have eczema. Flareups occur when there is contact with irritating substances (for example, soap or chlorine). Hot baths or showers also contribute to eczema in children.

In 30% of infants with eczema, certain foods cause the eczema to flare up. If you suspect a particular food (for example, cow's milk, eggs, or peanut butter) is causing your child's flareups, feed that food to your child one time (a "challenge") after avoiding it for 2 weeks. If the food is causing flare-ups, the eczema should become itchy or develop hives within 2 hours of eating the food. If this occurs, avoid ever giving this food to your child and talk to your health care provider about food substitutes.

How long does it last?

This is a chronic condition and will usually go away during adolescence. The goal is control, not cure. The early treatment of any itching can help prevent a severe rash.

How can I take care of my child?

- **Steroid creams or ointment** Steroid creams or ointments are the main treatment of the itch of eczema. Try OTC 1% hydrocortisone first twice daily for up to 3 days. If no relief you may need a prescription for stronger creams - You will need to be seen by your provider to get a prescription.
- **Keep the skin from getting too dry.** Your child should have one bath a day for max 10 minutes. Water-soaked skin is far less itchy, but it must be covered by a lubricating cream within 3 minutes of getting out of the bath with Eucerin or Aquaphor. Eczema is very sensitive to soaps, especially bubble bath. Young children can usually be cleaned without any soaps. Teenagers need a soap to wash under the arms, the genital area, and the feet. They can use a nondrying soap such as Dove Soap, Aquaphor Baby or Aveeno Baby for these areas. Make sure to rinse well.
- **Lubricating cream** Apply a lubricating cream once daily (twice a day during the winter) every day. Some lubricating creams are Aquaphor, Eucerin, Aveeno or Sarna. Children with eczema always have dry skin. After a 10-minute bath, the skin is hydrated and feels good. Help trap the moisture in the skin by putting lubricating cream all over the child's body while still damp (within 3 minutes of leaving the bath). Apply it after you have put steroid cream on any itchy areas. Do not use ointments, petroleum jelly, or vegetable shortening because they can block the sweat glands, increase the itching, and worsen the rash (especially in warm weather). Also, soap is needed to wash them off. For severe eczema, ointments may be needed temporarily to heal the skin.
- **Itching** At the first sign of any itching, apply the preventive steroid cream to the area that itches. Keep your child's fingernails cut short. Also, rinse your child's hands with water frequently to avoid infecting the eczema.
- **Antihistamine Medicine** An antihistamine is needed at bedtime for itching that is keeping your child from getting to sleep or causes your child to wake up during the night. You may give OTC Claritin or Zyrtec once daily if >2yrs or Benadryl every 6hr if >6mo.

What can be done to prevent eczema?

- Try to breast-feed all high-risk infants. Otherwise, use a soy formula. Also try to avoid cow's milk products, soy, eggs, peanut butter, wheat, and fish during your infant's first year. Try to avoid all nuts (including peanut butter) and seafood until 2 years old.
- Avoid wool fibers and clothes made of other scratchy, rough materials. They make eczema worse.
- Wear clothes made of cotton or cotton blends as much as possible.
- Avoid synthetic fibers and materials that hold in heat. Also avoid overdressing. Heat can make the rash worse.
- Avoid triggers that cause eczema to flare up, such as a lot of heat, sweating, excessive cold, dry air (use a humidifier), chlorine, harsh chemicals, and soaps.
- Never use bubble bath. It can cause a major flare-up.
- Keep your child off the grass during grass pollen season (May and June).
- Keep your child away from anyone with fever blisters. The herpes virus can cause a serious skin infection in children with eczema.

When should I call my child's health care provider?

Call IMMEDIATELY if:

- The rash looks infected and your child has a fever.
- The rash flares up after contact with fever blisters.

Call within 24 hours if:

- The rash becomes raw and open in several places.
- The rash looks infected (red streaks, pus, yellow scabs).
- The rash hasn't greatly improved in 7 days of treatment.
- You have other concerns or questions.