

Eczema

Brown Health Services Patient Education Series

What is eczema?

Eczema is a skin problem that causes itching, dryness, fine scales or flaking, and sometimes redness. Eczema can be a mild skin irritation that does not need medical treatment. Sometimes, however, it causes relentless itching and scratching. The skin may become scaly, raw, or thickened from constant or repeated flare-ups. The symptoms may always be present or may appear just in certain seasons or with stress. Atopic dermatitis usually appears first in early childhood, but may not start until teens or early 20's. It is a chronic condition that flares up with certain triggers for a given person and can usually be managed with a combination of measures and treatments.

How does it occur?

The cause of eczema is unclear. Often the tendency for eczema runs in the family along with asthma or hay fever/allergies. Aggravating factors that may cause eczema to flare up include: dry environments, heat, perspiration, rapid temperature changes, emotional stress, exposure to irritating chemicals or cleaning solutions, soaps, detergents, perfumes, wool, or synthetic fibers, dust, sand, and cigarette smoke.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptom of mild eczema is an area of fine, dry scales, often on the arms or legs. The skin may or may not itch. Severe eczema causes intense itching. The most common areas of itching are the fronts of the elbows, backs of the knees, and face. However, any area of skin may be affected. The skin may be sensitive to scratchy fabrics, especially wool. Eczema often becomes worse in the winter, when indoor air is very dry.

How is it diagnosed?

Your medical provider will examine your skin, will ask you about your medical history of rashes, and about other problems such as allergies or asthma.

How is it treated?

Keeping the skin well moisturized is very important in avoiding and treating eczema flares.

- Use creams or ointments (emollients) as they have higher oil content than lotions. Lotions may actually cause a flare of eczema due to their higher water and alcohol content and lower oil content.
- Use a humidifier in your room when the air is dry.
- To prevent your skin from becoming too dry, avoid exposure to a lot of water. Every time the skin gets wet, evaporation of water from the skin dries the skin even more.
- If you have severe eczema you should avoid prolonged water exposure.
- Very hot water dries out skin the most. Take shorter, cooler showers using a non soap cleanser like Cetaphil or a very gentle soap such as Dove or Tone. Gently dry off.
- While the skin is still slightly damp, apply emollient to seal in the layer of moisture next to the skin.
- Frequent use of moisturizing cream or ointment is recommended, not just after bathing.

Can medications help?

Mild eczema sometimes does not need any treatment beyond maintaining skin moisturization, e.g. not over drying.

Or mild eczema may go away if you put 1% hydrocortisone cream on the area a few times a day; no prescription is needed for this cream.

Severe eczema can be more difficult to treat. Antihistamines and steroid creams can help prevent or control the itching.

Antihistamines:

- Pills that lessen the itching of severe eczema.
- Diphenhydramine (Benadryl) causes drowsiness, so you may want to take this medicine only at bedtime. (It is important to prevent scratching during sleep.)
- Loratadine (Claritin), fexofenadine (Allegra), or cetirizine (Zyrtec) do not cause drowsiness for most people
- Non-sedating antihistamines are longer lasting, can be taken day or night to prevent itching, and are available over-the-counter.

Steroid creams or ointments:

- Help control the itching and rash caused by severe eczema
- For best results, use these medications exactly as prescribed
- Steroid creams and ointments come in many different strengths
- Most are used 2 times a day, for no longer than 2 weeks continuously.
- Do not use them more often than recommended, and use only on areas of the skin approved by your provider (potent prescription steroids are usually not intended for face and genital areas).
- Serious complications can develop from overuse of steroid medications.
- Use of steroid creams and ointments can be minimized by keeping your skin well lubricated.

Newer skin treatments for eczema include tacrolimus (Protopic) and pimecrolimus (Elidel).

These do not work as quickly as topical steroids, but are effective when topical steroids have failed.

Occasionally, oral steroids (prednisone) may be used to control a severe flare of eczema.