

Eczema - coping tips

Eczema is an inflammatory skin condition with symptoms that include dry, itching and reddened skin patches. There is no cure, but the condition can be managed. Treatment options include emollients (moisturisers), topical steroids (medicated creams) and oral antihistamines.

Most people with eczema find that their symptoms are worsened by common aspects of daily living, such as weather, household chemicals and stress. The following suggestions may help you to better manage your eczema and reduce the incidence of flare-ups. Always see your doctor or dermatologist for further information and advice.

Good hygiene is important

Skin affected by eczema is more vulnerable to a range of infections including impetigo, cold sores and warts. It is thought that the bacterium *Staphylococcus aureus* can not only cause a secondary infection of impetigo, but also contribute to the symptoms of eczema. Suggestions for washing include:

- Take lukewarm baths or showers – baths are preferable.
- Don't use soap, as the ingredients may aggravate your eczema. Use soap-free products, such as sorbolene cream, as effective and gentle alternatives.
- Bath oils can help to moisturise the skin while bathing.
- Do not wash the hair in the bath as shampoo will irritate eczema on the skin.
- Even the use of warm water alone, without any added soap or cleansing agent, is enough in most cases.
- When towelling dry, pat rather than rub.

Reduce skin irritation

People with eczema have hypersensitive skin. Irritants like heat or detergents can easily trigger a bout of eczema. Suggestions include:

- Avoid overheating the skin; for example, wear several layers of clothing that you can remove instead of one heavy layer, and don't put too many blankets on your bed. Avoid doonas.
- Don't use perfumed bubble bath or 'medicated' bath products.
- Do not wash your hair in the bath.
- Wear soft, smooth materials next to your skin, preferably 100 per cent cotton. Avoid scratchy materials like pure wool, polyester or acrylic. You could try a cotton and synthetic mix material – this is fine for some people with eczema. Remove labels from clothing.
- Some laundry detergents or fabric conditioners can lead to skin irritation. Rinse clothes thoroughly after washing.
- Always wear protective gloves when using any type of chemical or detergent. You might want to use cotton gloves inside the rubber or PVC gloves.
- Avoid chlorinated pools. If you really want to swim in a chlorinated pool, slather your skin beforehand with a waterproof barrier cream, such as petroleum jelly (Vaseline).

Be careful with all skin products

Suggestions include:

- Remember that even hypoallergenic cosmetics can irritate your skin. Whenever possible, keep your face free of make-up.
- Avoid perfumes, fragranced skin lotions and strongly scented shampoos.

- When using a new cosmetic, try testing it first on a small, inconspicuous area of skin like your forearm. If you experience a reaction, don't use the product at all.

Avoid allergens whenever possible

In some cases, eczema is thought to be an allergic reaction to environmental triggers. Some people with resistant eczema find it helpful to reduce exposure to a wide range of known allergens including:

- House dust mites
- Moulds
- Grass pollens.

Abrupt changes in temperature should be avoided

Abrupt temperature and humidity changes can sometimes irritate the skin: for example, going in and out of air-conditioned buildings on hot days or heated buildings on cold days. Hard physical activity or exercise that makes you heavily perspire can also trigger the itch of eczema. Suggestions include:

- In winter, don't overheat your house. Dress warmly when going outdoors and remove the extra layers as soon as you return.
- In summer, don't overcool your house. Air-conditioners can dry out the air and irritate your skin.
- Avoid hard physical activity in hot weather. For example, do your gardening first thing in the morning, or in the evening when the sun is lower in the sky.

Stress management

Some people with eczema find that emotional stress worsens their symptoms. You may like to consider different ways to manage your stress including:

- Meditation
- Regular exercise
- Yoga
- 'Losing yourself' in favourite hobbies or interests
- Cognitive behaviour therapy.

Special diets may not help

In most cases, eczema isn't caused or aggravated by diet. Reducing your intake of certain foods (such as dairy products) or eliminating them from your diet altogether can lead to nutritional deficiencies. However, if you notice that your eczema seems to get worse after eating a particular food, you may be one of the exceptions to this general rule. See your doctor or dietitian for proper allergy testing and dietary advice – never self-diagnose, or you risk depriving yourself of nutritious foods for no good reason.

General suggestions

Other tips to manage your eczema include:

- Keep your fingernails short – longer nails are more likely to injure your skin when you scratch.
- A well-ventilated house reduces the risk of mould and damp.
- If the water in your area is 'hard' (full of minerals) or alkaline, consider installing a water-softening device.
- Have a regular swim in the sea in warm weather whenever you can – seawater is known to reduce the symptoms of eczema.
- Limited sun exposure – for example, when swimming at the beach – can help relieve eczema symptoms. However, be aware that ultraviolet radiation is a risk factor for skin cancer and premature ageing of the skin. If sun exposure causes overheating, it can also aggravate eczema so don't overdo it.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Dermatologist
- Eczema Association of Australasia Tel. 1300 300 182 or (07) 3206 3633

Things to remember

- Eczema is a type of inflammatory skin condition with symptoms including dry, itching and reddened skin patches.
- Skin affected by eczema is more vulnerable to a range of infections including impetigo, cold sores and warts.
- Avoiding environmental triggers and stress management are helpful in the management of chronic eczema.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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