



Fact sheet

Centre for Community Child Health

Understanding eczema

Eczema is the third most common reason that Australian children are referred to paediatricians. In fact, Australian children have one of the highest incidences of eczema in the world. Childhood eczema isn't just a struggle for your affected child, but can also affect the quality of life of you and your family.

When does eczema occur?

More than half of all eczema sufferers show signs within their first 12 months of life and 20 per cent of children develop eczema before the age of five. However, eczema resolves for most affected children.

What are the symptoms

Eczema commonly appears as a dry, red rash and moderate-to-severely itching skin. Babies with eczema will usually have a rash on their face, which also appears on the scalp, behind the ears, on the body, and on arms and legs. In toddlers and older children, the rash often appears in the skin creases at the wrists, elbows, ankles and the knees.

What causes eczema?

We don't know the exact cause of eczema, but we do know that there are triggers and other factors that can make your child more likely to be affected:

- **Family history:** Eczema is most common in children who have a family history of eczema, asthma or hay fever.
- **Particular food:** In some children eczema can be triggered by dairy and wheat products, citrus fruits, eggs, nuts, seafood, chemical food additives or preservatives and colourings. However, it's not a good idea to change your child's diet to try to remove possible trigger foods without consulting a doctor or dietician.
- **Irritants:** Common irritants include tobacco smoke, chemicals, soaps, detergents, fabrics, weather (hot and humid or cold and dry conditions) and air conditioning or overheating.

- **Allergens:** For some eczema sufferers, triggers can include house dust mites, moulds, grasses, plant pollens, foods, pets and clothing, soaps, shampoos and washing powders, cosmetics and/or toiletries.

How to manage eczema

Stick to good quality, soap-free, specially developed hypoallergenic products and avoid anything perfumed. This applies to products including moisturisers, bath oils, body wash and cleansers.

Moisturiser is an essential part of eczema management. Keep your child's skin well moisturised, which might mean moisturising a number of times each day. Thicker creams and ointments are more effective than thin lotions.

Common triggers

Heat is the most common trigger of eczema. When you are bathing your child, make sure the water temperature is at or below 29 degrees. Check your hot water heater thermostat to see if you can turn it down. After bath, pat your child dry, don't rub, and use a soft towel to avoid irritating the skin. Apply moisturiser straight away.

Clothing and materials

Avoid clothing and materials with:

- rough, scratchy fibres
- synthetic fabric
- wool (including sheepskin).

You can also consider entirely removing rugs and carpets from the home, to reduce exposure not only to coarser fibres but also to the dust and mites that live in floor coverings.

Don't forget about the soap powder that you use to wash bed linens and towels. The Eczema Foundation recommends non-biological soap powders and detergents instead of regular detergent, soap and fabric softener.

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Children with special healthcare needs

Of the Australian children who start their first year of formal full-time school each year, the majority start with their development on track, ready to take advantage of everything that school has to offer. About 4 per cent of children will start school with a significant developmental delay or disability that has been clearly identified; these children are likely to receive assistance, such as a classroom aide, to help them participate to the fullest at school.

However, Australian Early Development Index data have shown that up to 20 per cent of children start at school with some level of special healthcare need that may not yet have been formally identified, and for which they may not receive any formal special assistance at school. For these children, there can be significant challenges in taking advantage of everything that school has to offer.

Defining special healthcare needs

Children with special healthcare needs are those who *“have or are at increased risk for chronic physical, developmental, behavioural, or emotional conditions and who also require health and related services of a type or amount beyond that required by children generally.”*

Special healthcare needs can include those that impact on physical health—such as diabetes or epilepsy—and those that impact on your child’s psychosocial health—such as attention deficit disorder and autism spectrum disorders.

Starting school with special healthcare needs

Children with special healthcare needs are often more poorly equipped in terms of their school readiness when they start school. The initial difficulties that these children experience

on school entry lead to achievement gaps between them and their peers that only worsen over time if appropriate supports aren’t provided. The ability of these children to meet the learning demands of the classroom, as well as make friends and fit in with their peer group can be compromised. Without prompt identification and support, these children can often be left behind.

Working with others in your community

There are different risk and protective factors in children’s lives that can help or hinder their growth and development.

If you are concerned about your child’s ability make the most of all the opportunities that come with starting school, it’s important to work closely with the different teachers and service providers in your child’s life to ensure that they can get the support they need:

- Plan for your child’s transition to school, involve education, health and social services to help make everyone aware of your child’s needs.
- Use strategies to bridge the environment between kindergarten or preschool and school. Take opportunities to familiarise your child with the new school and its staff.
- Advocate on behalf of your child, don’t be afraid to ask questions.
- Draw on your existing support networks and expand them. People who are already in your networks—friends, family, other parents—can provide you with help and support. Seek out opportunities to meet new people and interact with services that are new to you.