



The Royal
Children's
Hospital
Melbourne

Knowing your child's eczema

A guide to understanding your child's eczema

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We would like to thank the children and their parents for their participation and time spent in helping with the production of this booklet, and acknowledge the wonderful care given by the nurses and doctors to the eczema patients looked after by The Royal Children's Hospital.



This booklet was made possible by the generous support of Ego Pharmaceuticals manufacturers of Ego products.

Designed by The Royal Children's Hospital Educational Resource Centre.

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Eczema

What is eczema?

Eczema is a common skin condition affecting around thirty per cent of children in Australia. The exact cause of eczema is not known. However if there is a history of eczema, asthma or hay fever in the family, your child is more likely to develop one of these conditions. Unfortunately there is no cure for eczema, although there are many ways to keep it under control.

Approximately fifty per cent of children will no longer be troubled by eczema by two years of age and eighty five per cent by five years of age.

Eczema is a red, hot, dry and itchy rash that can affect one or many areas on the face and body. It can be mild, moderate or severe. There are often scratch marks on the skin because of the itch. These areas may become infected with bacteria and this can worsen the eczema.

What aggravates eczema?

HEAT, DRYNESS and PRICKLE aggravate eczema. It is important you are aware of these three factors and remove them from your child's environment. You should keep your child cool, well moisturised and in loose, light cotton clothing and blankets.





Heat and clothing

There are many things that can make your child hot. Clothing can aggravate eczema. It is best to dress your child in one to two thin layers of cotton clothing. It is easier and more effective to remove the top layer of clothing to suit the environment and stop your child becoming hot and itchy than it is to change the environmental temperature. If your child is participating in physical activities, take a layer of clothing off before doing so to avoid overheating and triggering the itch, or apply a wet singlet under the sports uniform prior to playing. Educate your child's teachers about this too.



Car trips

Travelling in the car can be an unpleasant experience when your child has eczema. The heat generated in the car can cause the child to become hot and itchy. Sunlight shades are beneficial in reducing the heat of the car. Heaters should be used minimally or switched off. Air conditioning can be used.

It is important to try and predict the occurrence of overheating and also avoid clothing that may be trapping heat. Avoid long car trips if possible and dress your child for the car ride not for

the destination. A wet singlet alone or under a dry layer of clothes may be useful for a long drive on a warm day.

Bedtime

Children often itch more at night because they get hot under the blankets, the bedroom is overheated or they are dressed too warmly for bed. If the eczema is not under control, children may have difficulty sleeping and may wake a few times each night. Children with eczema should ideally sleep in their own beds, so as not to overheat. Summer pj's, soft cotton or silk sheets and at most one thin cotton blanket or a light weight sleeping bag are appropriate bed linen all year round.

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Heat

Woollen underlays or blankets, plastic mattress protectors, electric blankets, hot water bottles, heat pillows, wheat bags or thick doonas should not be used.

Frequent waking and scratching at night and blood on the sheets in the morning are signs that your child will need a wet dressing applied just before bed. Pj's can be worn over the wet dressings. Wet dressings can be left on all night if your child is sleeping. If your child wakes take off the dressing if it is dry and apply a layer of moisturising cream and then the pj's and back to bed. For older children your doctor may prescribe an antihistamine at night until the eczema and sleeping pattern improves. Some antihistamines can cause drowsiness, these should not be used routinely, or for children under two years of age.

School

Your child should wear one to two thin cotton layers at school. Woollen jumpers will make them hot and itchy. They should remove their school jumper when in the class room.



It is important to educate your child's teacher about factors that worsen eczema. Ask them not to sit your child next to the heater. If your child is itchy at school they should apply moisturiser and a cool towel, or spray water via a spray bottle to the itchy area. The teacher should not make a fuss in front of the class. However, they should be aware to remind your child to apply treatment in a private place. On hot days or when participating in sports, your child may wet his/her clothes to reduce the heat and prevent the itch.

Home

The home should be kept cool. Air blowing heaters are the most drying to the skin. It is best if your child's bedroom is not heated. We recommend it not to be heated more than 15 degrees overnight and 20 degrees during the day. Remember, your child is more affected by heat than you. It is better to apply another thin layer of clothing rather than turning up the heater. Do not be concerned about your child catching a 'cold' from being under dressed or wearing wet clothing or dressings to bed as this is an old wives' tale, you cannot catch a cold from being cold.

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Heat



Dryness and the skin

Children with eczema have dry skin. The drier the skin the itchier and more inflamed it will become. Your child's skin should be moisturised top to toe at least twice a day to help with this dryness. There are many things that can dry the skin like air-blowing heaters, cleaning agents, soap, swimming and dry winds. Your child's skin will be drier in the winter as the humidity is lower and heaters are used more, so additional applications of the moisturiser may be needed. You may notice the eczema will improve on a tropical holiday or in summer. Try to avoid baby wipes, as they dry and irritate the skin. Use a disposable towel and water instead.

What clothes detergent should I use?

Use a non-perfumed soap powder and softener in your washing machine and ensure clothes are rinsed well. Dressings used for wet dressings may be washed in the washing machine in a bag for delicates with these detergents. Dry garments in a tumble dryer if possible, as clothes tend to dry softer than if hung on the line.

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Dryness

Dryness



Can my child go swimming?

Yes, your child is able to swim, however if they are having a flare of their eczema your doctor or nurse may suggest your child may need to stop swimming until the eczema improves.

After swimming remove the chlorine/salt water in a cool fresh water shower/bath with bath oil, and then apply a moisturiser before dressing.

Do dummies aggravate eczema?

Dummies may aggravate eczema around the mouth, chin and chest areas. This is because saliva wells up under the dummy and irritates the skin. Eczema often gets worse during teething. Food products may also aggravate the skin around the mouth. This is not necessarily an allergy and the area is best protected with regular application of a moisturiser.



Prickle and the skin

Clothing can worsen eczema especially when it has a 'prickly' feeling. Especially seams, wool, stitching, tags, frills and lace edges will make your child feel itchier. Cotton or silk fibres are the fabrics of choice for clothing or bed linen. If the seams are harsh turn the garment inside out and unpick the tags, or line areas with a piece of silk. Undergarments made of silk such as boxer shorts are popular with children with eczema for day and night time use. If you are unsure about a piece of clothing feel it. If it feels slightly rough or prickly to you it will be very irritating to your child.



Allergies and eczema

Is my child allergic to food?

Foods are not the single cause or cure of eczema. Only about twenty per cent of children with eczema have proven allergies to food. However if most of these children with food allergies stopped eating the foods they are allergic to they would still have some eczema and require the same topical treatments as other children with eczema.

Most children with allergies to foods may develop worse eczema and a hive like reaction immediately or within two or more hours after food and become very itchy. These reactions tend to start in the early months of life and are seen less often as children grow out of them.

Only about twenty per cent of children with eczema have proven allergies to food.

If you are concerned your child may have food allergies, keep a food diary about the reactions to these foods to show to your doctor or nurse. Some common foods that may cause allergies are; egg, dairy, nuts, and wheat. When starting a new food, start one at a time and give only a small amount of each new food each day, try not to do not give large amounts too quickly. Do not restrict your child's diet without consulting a doctor.

Dust mite and eczema

It would appear that the house dust mite can flare eczema. However, the degree of importance of the irritation of the house dust mite is controversial. Many people without eczema are allergic to house dust mite and many eczema sufferers do not improve greatly when they use anti-dust mite measures. From our experience, we think that house dust mite probably plays a minor role in triggering eczema, but occasionally can be more important. Please discuss this issue further with your doctor or nurse if you are concerned.

A close-up photograph of a woman with long dark hair, wearing a black top with a vibrant floral pattern in blue, yellow, and pink. She is applying a clear adhesive bandage to her left forearm. The background is softly blurred, showing what appears to be a window or a bright indoor setting.

Can I immunise my child?

Your child should continue to have all immunisations unless told otherwise by your doctor. If your child is allergic to eggs there is no reason your child cannot be immunised for measles, mumps or rubella. Although, if the reaction to egg is severe, it is best to have the flu or yellow fever immunisation performed by your local doctor or immunisation clinic. Contact your General Practitioner if you have any questions. Children with eczema are encouraged to have the chicken pox immunisation.

Infection and eczema

Children with eczema are prone to bacterial and viral skin infections. Most children with eczema carry bacteria on their skin. When the skin is scratched this bacteria can cause a bacterial skin infection. There are some things you can do to reduce this from happening:

- Keep the eczema as controlled as possible using the cortisone ointments at the beginning of the flare to avoid getting the eczema out of control.
- Wash your hands before applying any creams or wet dressings on your child.
- Keep the skin well moisturised. Moisturise twice a day from top to toe even if the eczema is clear.
- When removing creams from the jars do not double dip. Rather remove the cream from the jar with a spoon or spatula onto a clean paper towel or plate and then apply to the skin from there.
- Daily bathing washes the bacteria from the skin and the bleach helps to reduce the bacteria.
- Remove aggravators from the environment.
- Sometimes the infection may also require a course of antibiotics to clear it.

Infection

How will I know if my child's eczema is infected and what should I do if it is?

When eczema is infected it is often scabbed or crusted. This is normally yellow in colour. There may also be areas of weeping. This is often a sudden change in the normal eczema. Your child may also be itchier than usual and the skin may be painful to touch – when severe your child may find it difficult to extend their elbows or knees.

Children with eczema often get secondary infections if the eczema is not under control. The eczema becomes infected because children scratch and the skin is then broken. One small area of infection can flare other areas of skin.

The cold sore virus can also infect eczema. A sudden onset of clusters of blisters will result from this infection, which requires special treatment. Your child should avoid close contact with

people with cold sores and school sores. If the infection is severe or near the eyes, seek medical assistance.

If you think the eczema is infected, you should go to your family doctor and have the infected areas assessed and swabbed. If your doctor thinks the eczema is infected he/she may start your child on a course of antibiotics.

If there are areas of crusts it is very important to remove them. If you do not remove the crusts, you are not treating the infection properly – antibiotics cannot get to the crusts to treat the infection. Bleach baths are also recommended if your child's skin is infected and difficult to control.

The eczema becomes infected because children scratch and the skin is then broken.

Treatments for eczema

Eczema may require many treatments to control it. It is also very important to reduce environmental triggers to reduce the number of flares and need for treatments.

Treatments fall into two categories; every day and flaring.

Everyday treatments

For every day treatments apply a regular moisturiser from top to toe, a daily cool bath and avoid the everyday triggers (heat, prickle and dryness).

Flaring treatments

For flaring treatments apply cortisones at the first sign of redness or itch. Then apply wet dressings within a day of starting the cortisones if there hasn't been an improvement. Add bleach to a daily bath and then wean slowly. Stop these treatments once the eczema has cleared and continue with the every day treatments.

Moisturisers

What moisturisers should I use and how often should I use them?

Children with eczema usually have very dry skin, which worsens the itch. Moisturisers are used to prevent the skin from drying and are very important in the management of eczema.

Moisturisers can be used alone and can also be applied over the cortisones and under wet dressings. They are applied as often as required to prevent the skin from becoming dry, which may be three to five times a day every day, top to toe. They should be applied on a regular basis.

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Your child should be encouraged to participate in and recognize the need for the application of moisturisers. If any creams irritate the skin, stop its use, apply a bland moisturiser, and contact your local doctor or dermatology nurse if it continues.

Some of the greasier moisturisers may cause blocked pores and heat the skin. The blocked pores look like small pimples. If this occurs, change the moisturiser to a cream. Do not double dip, when removing the moisturiser from the jar as this can cause bacteria to spread. Use a spatula or spoon to place moisturiser on a clean paper towel, and then take it from there to apply to the skin. The better moisturisers are ones obtained from pharmacies.

Bath time

A daily cool bath is considered a treatment for children with eczema. A hot bath can heat your child and cause him/her to become itchy and inflame the skin. Bath your child once to twice a day in tepid water (about 30 degrees). To prevent dryness, add one

capful of bath oil to the bath and use this as a soap substitute. Depending on the severity of your child's eczema or if it is infected, a bleach and salt bath may be recommended by a health professional. After getting out of the bath just pat dry the skin and leave some water on it if possible. Try to moisturise the skin within three minutes, this way you are trapping some of the water in the skin making it more hydrated.

For a bleach bath add the bleach at the last five minutes of the bath. Add 12mls of white king bleach (4%) to every ten litres of bath water, making sure you wet your child's face and head. Please note this concentration is less than a swimming pool and is not toxic. Initially the bleach may be needed every day and over time this will be reduced, depending on how your child's eczema is. Salt is an anti inflammatory, anti itch, anti sting, anti septic and helps to cool the skin. The dilution is 100g of salt for every ten litres of bath water.



Moisturisers

Cortisone creams



My doctor has prescribed a cortisone cream. Is this safe?

Your doctor may prescribe a cortisone cream or ointment for areas of eczema on the face and body. These ointments help to settle inflammation and redness of eczema.

Cortisone is a natural body hormone and, if used as prescribed by your doctor, is completely safe. Avoid strong cortisone ointments on the face – hydrocortisone is preferred for this area.

How do I apply cortisone ointments?

When using cortisone ointments apply a layer of the cortisone to the red areas. Do not use a thin layer as this will not treat your child's eczema effectively.

Cortisone ointments are best used once or twice a day only when the skin is red. Stop their usage only when the eczema has cleared and restart if the eczema reappears.

Cortisone creams/ointments come in different strengths and your doctor should discuss with you what strength is appropriate for your child. Apply the moisturiser directly over the cortisone ointment, top to toe.

Cortisone ointments are best used once or twice a day only when the skin is red.

To remove the crusts

The easiest way to remove the crusts is soaking in a cool bath with salt, bleach and bath oil and gently wipe away the crusts with a disposable towel.

Alternatively:

1. Fill a bowl with tepid water. Soak disposable towels in the water.
2. Apply the wet towels to the crusted areas for a few minutes, while also trying to gently wipe the crusts away.
3. Do this half to one hourly until the crusts have been removed.
4. When the crusts are removed you can start the moisturisers and cortisone creams as needed, even if there are open areas of skin. If there are areas of weeping simply hold a wet disposable towel to the area for five to ten minutes every half to one hour until the weeping stops, if crusts persist you may need to continue to cool compress more frequently. Do not apply creams over crusted and weeping areas. Remember, if the skin is dry, moisturise it, and if it is wet, dry it out with wet disposable towels.



Treatment

Treatment

Wet dressings for eczema

Wet dressings are important for the effective treatment of eczema. They are essential when your child is itchy, hot, and waking from the itch.

Your child may need a wet dressing if:

- They itch and scratch during the night
- If there is blood on the sheets in the morning
- If the eczema is still present despite treatment with cortisone creams/ ointments, moisturisers and bath oils.

You will need to apply wet dressings at night for a few nights to get it under control. Early use of wet dressings will substantially reduce the amount of cortisone cream needed to control the eczema.

Parents who have used wet dressings, generally express great satisfaction with the technique.

Why do wet dressings help eczema?

- **COOL** wet dressings help to reduce the itch. The itch is worse when the skin is hot.
- **DAMP** wet dressings help with the treatment of infection. They help to clean the skin's surface.
- The skin is **REHYDRATED** with the moisturiser under the wet dressing.
- Wet dressings **PROTECT** the skin from trauma.
- Wet dressings help to **IMPROVE** sleep.

What items do I need for a wet dressing?

- Tubifast
- Alternatively if the wet dressing materials are not available a layer of wet clothes may be applied instead.
- Cortisone cream (if prescribed)
- Moisturiser
- Tepid water
- Bowl
- Bath oil
- Scissors
- Cello paper

Wet dressings may be applied as often as required to any area of the body with eczema, for example, the elbow or the knee. The wet dressings will dry, remove dressings as soon as they are dry (unless your child is sleeping) as they can irritate the skin by causing it to become hot, dry and itchy. Please note the water used in the wet dressing does not have to be cold. Wet dressings cool the skin by the water evaporating just like sweat.



Treatment

Treatment

How to apply a wet dressing



1. Get your equipment ready, wash your hands, fill the bowl with tepid tap water and using a spatula place the creams on a paper towel.



2. Measure and cut two lengths of tubifast for each area. Add one capful of bath oil and one layer of tubifast for each area to the bowl of water.



3. Apply the cortisone creams to the affected areas as prescribed. A weaker cortisone is applied to the face.



4. Apply the moisturiser top to toe, including directly over the cortisone cream.



5. Apply the wet layer and then the dry layer of tubifast to each area. If the trunk is affected apply a wet layer of tubifast or a wet singlet or t-shirt.



A thin layer of cotton clothing can be worn over wet dressings. Remove wet dressings when they dry, unless the child is sleeping, and apply a liberal layer of moisturiser from top to toe.

To cool compress

1. Fill a bowl with cool tap water.
2. Add a capful of bath oil to the bowl of water.
3. Add the disposable towels and soak until wet.
4. Remove the disposable towel from the water and squeeze the excess water, being careful to keep the towel quite wet.
5. Hold the wet towel on the red, hot and itchy areas for 5-10 minutes. Repeat this process as often as required until the redness, heat and itch has subsided.
6. Apply a moisturiser to the skin once the wet towel has been removed.



Wet dressings and cool compressing should not be used as a last resort treatment when your child's eczema is at its worst. Think of them as first line treatments when the eczema flares or becomes itchy. Use these helpful techniques as soon as the eczema flares rather than leaving it until it becomes severe and infected.

If your child initially refuses the wet dressings or cool compressing, persist slowly with these techniques. Teach your child the value of wet dressings and encourage them to participate with the application or to apply wet dressings to their doll. Rewards are important in encouraging the application and continuation, and eventually your child will understand the benefits.

Questions

What can I use if my child's face, neck, trunk and scalp are itchy?

Instead of using a wet dressing, use cool compressing to areas on the face, head or other areas on the body for immediate relief of itch. Wet cool compresses can be applied to the neck as a scarf (only knot once), and a wet bandana can be applied to the head. The scarf and bandana should be applied only when your child is awake and under constant supervision.

For the trunk, it is advised for you to apply a wet singlet/t-shirt over a layer of moisturiser if the trunk is red or itchy. A dry t-shirt can be applied over this.

My child with eczema has behaviour that is sometimes difficult to control. She often scratches to get my attention or to get what she wants. What should I do to help this situation?

Some children with eczema have learnt that if they scratch they will get what they want or attention from their parents. It is encouraged that parents do not give in to their child's

scratching behaviour. This behaviour is often worse when the child is crying, stressed, upset or having a tantrum to get their own way. Treat the tantrum first and later deal with the eczema.

When scratching gets attention the behaviour is more likely to be repeated. Avoid always telling your child to stop scratching or giving in. Rather apply a cool compress or wet dressings/clothes and use distraction activities, especially ones using your child's hands. Distraction is always a good way to stop children scratching by taking their mind off the skin and itch.

Positive language should be used often as possible, never use words such as 'bad skin'. It is common for behaviour to deteriorate when the eczema is deteriorating.

When the eczema is under control behaviour usually improves. This can be due to many factors such as itchy, hot skin, and lack of sleep. Seek help and talk to your treating doctor or nurse if your child's behaviour is worsening.



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Questions

Questions

What is the best way for my child to manage her eczema whilst she is at school?

Sometimes children with eczema are embarrassed about their skin and some children are also teased. Some tips for school are;

- Never make a child wear wet dressings to school
- Children should take some moisturiser to school and apply to their skin in a private area – being careful not to double dip
- If children feel itchy at school, a water spray bottle or cool compresses can be applied in a private place or where they feel comfortable
- For sport, a wet singlet under the clothes will reduce heat and itch
- If a child has a pollen allergy and they are undertaking a sporting activity on grass then a non-sedating histamine can be taken prior to participating

- Educate the teacher and school on the eczema, what your child needs to do to keep her eczema under control and what the triggers at the school may be – for example the heater in the classroom being too hot, or the need to seat your child away from the heater.

What sunscreen should my child use?

A high quality sunscreen obtained from a pharmacy for sensitive skin is recommended. Always test first on a smaller area on the arm to determine if it is aggravating.



Dermatology

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