

# Eczema



Eczema is a common skin condition that usually begins before your child is one year old. The affected skin is dry, red and itchy. Sometimes these areas of skin can become cracked, weepy and then scab over.

Unfortunately there is no cure for eczema. However, there are many ways to keep eczema under control and help your child feel more comfortable. Eczema is not contagious.

## Signs and symptoms of eczema

- Babies with eczema usually have a red, dry rash on their face. The rash may be on their scalp, body, arms and legs or behind their ears. The rash is very itchy and may keep them awake at night.
- In toddlers and older children, the eczema rash is often in the skin creases around the knees, wrists, elbows and ankles.
- In some children the rash can cover their entire body.

It is common for the severity of the eczema to change, and you will notice that sometimes your child's eczema is mild, while at other times it gets worse. It is important to effectively manage the eczema and control it as soon as it flares up.

Secondary bacterial or viral skin infections are also common in children with eczema, especially when the eczema is not well controlled. Do not allow anyone with a cold sore to kiss your child, as the eczema may become infected with the cold sore virus. The signs of a secondary infection are weepy, crusted and broken areas of eczema.

## What causes eczema?

The cause of eczema is not known. If a member of your family has eczema, asthma or hay fever, then it is more likely that your child will have eczema. Some children with eczema may also develop asthma or hay fever.

Eczema can be brought on by a number of things, such as:

- becoming overheated with clothing, blankets, heaters
- dryness of the skin
- irritation from soaps, detergents, fabrics or other chemicals
- food allergies or intolerances
- allergies to environmental allergens, such as dust mites, plant pollens or animal fur
- viruses and other common infections.

## Care at home

Eczema can be well controlled at home in most children by identifying and avoiding triggers. Using the following strategies will help control the eczema and make your child more comfortable.

### Avoid things that irritate the skin

Each child may react to different things, and it may take a while to work out what is irritating your child's skin. Some common things that can irritate the skin include:

- dummies, dribbling or food around the mouth – apply thick moisturiser around the mouth, wash the skin with a soft, wet towel after eating and then reapply the moisturiser
- prickly materials, such as woollen or acrylic clothing, bedding and car seat covers
- detergents, soaps, bubble baths, antiseptic washes
- toothpaste – use a product without SLS as an ingredient
- environmental allergens, such as pet fur, pollen and house dust mites – if you think your child may be allergic to one of these allergens, take them to see an allergist (a doctor who specialises in detecting allergies).

### Keep the skin moisturised

A thick, plain moisturiser with no fragrance should be used as often as necessary on your child, even when the skin is clear of eczema. Some children will require moisturiser application once or twice a day, while others will need it more often. Thicker creams are more effective than lotions.

Fragrance-free moisturisers, bath oils or soap-free body wash should be used in the bath and shower.

## Keep your child cool

Heat is the most common trigger for eczema. You can keep your child cool by:

- dressing your child in one or two thin layers of cotton clothing
- removing doonas and woollen blankets from your child's bed and using a cotton blanket or sheet instead
- keeping your house below 20°C during the day
- keep your child's room at or below 15°C overnight
- telling teachers at your childcare centre, kindergarten or school how to dress your child appropriately.

It is a good idea to bathe your child at least once a day in a cool bath. The bath should be no hotter than 30°C, and have one to two capfuls of plain, non-perfumed bath oil added.

## Control your child's itching

Scratching makes the eczema worse and can cause infection. Try these ideas to help them stop scratching:

- Apply a soft, cool, wet towel to the itchy area for immediate relief, and leave on for 5–10 minutes. Remove the towel and apply a thick layer of moisturiser.
- Apply wet dressings at bedtime, particularly if the eczema is not controlled within 24–48 hours of starting cortisone treatment (if prescribed - see below). Wet dressings should be stopped when the eczema has cleared and then used again if it flares up. Wet dressings are very effective and are usually only needed for three to five nights. See [Wet dressing instructions](#) (rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/derm/Wet\_dressings\_eczema.pdf)
- A wet T-shirt or singlet underneath a thin layer of cotton clothing is a good way to reduce the itch and redness on your child's body. You can repeat this throughout the day and night until the itch and redness subside.
- Use a mineral salt spray (available at pharmacies) for immediate relief of itch.
- Distract your child when they are scratching.
- Keep your child's fingernails short and clean.

## Eczema and diet

Most children with eczema do not have any reactions to food. However, in some children, food allergy may be a trigger.

- Food allergy needs to be considered in babies with very widespread eczema who are not responding to eczema treatment.
- Sometimes older children can be intolerant to acidic foods and preservatives, leading to eczema breakouts around the mouth. This is not an allergy.
- All foods should be considered 'innocent until proven guilty'. It is important not to restrict your child's diet unless you have been advised to do so by a doctor, allergist or dietitian. An allergist may choose to test your child to confirm any food allergies.

## When to see a doctor

Take your child to the doctor if:

- your child's eczema is not getting better after two days of regular treatment
- your child is showing signs of infection: weepy, yellow-coloured scabs and broken areas of eczema
- you are concerned about your child's health or skin for any reason.

If your child's eczema has developed a bacterial infection, they may need antibiotics. Very occasionally, if your child has a severely infected rash, they may need to be treated in hospital.

If your child's eczema is complicated or difficult to treat, a doctor or dermatology nurse will prepare an eczema treatment plan for your child.

## Bleach baths

Bleach baths may be recommended if your child's eczema is infected and difficult to control. When making a bleach bath, the temperature of the bath should be no hotter than 30°C. Fill the bath to the desired level using a 10-litre bucket. Add the following to each bath:

- 1-2 capfuls of bath oil per bath
- 100 grams (1/3 cup) of salt per 10 litres of water
- 12 mls of White King Bleach (4%) per 10 litres of water

Do not rinse your child after the bath.

To begin with, your child should have a bleach bath every day for one month. After the first month, give your child a bleach bath three times a week for a month, then once a week for a month. If their eczema starts to flare again, increase the frequency of bleach baths, then wean off.

## Cortisone treatment

Your doctor may prescribe a cortisone-based cream or ointment. Cortisone is a natural hormone that is produced by the body. Cortisones are very effective in controlling eczema, and are safe if used as directed.

Weaker cortisones are used on your child's face, and stronger cortisones are used on their body. It is important to apply the correct cortisone to all areas of eczema, even if the skin is open. Any medicines, creams and ointments should be used as prescribed by the doctor.

Even though weak cortisone creams are available from the pharmacy without a prescription, it is important to get a cream or lotion that is suitable for your child, and that you know how to apply it properly. Seek medical advice before using cortisone treatments on your child.

## Removing your child's scabs

If the eczema develops scabs, it is important to remove the scabs. The eczema treatment won't reach the skin if scabs are in the way. To remove scabs, give your child a cool bath for 30 minutes to soften the scabs. Then before getting them out of the bath, wipe the crusts off with a soft, wet towel. Once the scabs are removed, your child's eczema treatment plan should be followed again, with creams applied on the open skin.

## Key points to remember

- There is no cure for eczema but it can be well controlled.
- It is common for the severity of the eczema to change, and it is important to control the eczema as soon as it flares up.
- To control eczema, keep your child cool, moisturise them frequently, and keep them away from things that irritate their skin.
- For eczema that's difficult to manage, ask your doctor to complete an eczema treatment plan for your child.

## For more information

- The Royal Children's Hospital Dermatology Department: [Eczema resources](http://rch.org.au/derm/eczema/Knowing_your_child_s_eczema) (rch.org.au/derm/eczema/Knowing\_your\_child\_s\_eczema)
- The Royal Children's Hospital Dermatology Department: [Wet dressing instructions](http://rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/derm/Wet_dressings_eczema.pdf) (rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/derm/Wet\_dressings\_eczema.pdf)
- The Royal Children's Hospital Dermatology Department: [Formula for an eczema bath](http://rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/derm/eczema-bath-information.pdf) (rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/derm/eczema-bath-information.pdf)
- The Royal Children's Hospital: Eczema workshops run by the Dermatology Nurse Practitioners. At these three-hour workshops, your child will receive assessment, education and management plans. Your doctor needs to [send a referral](http://rch.org.au/derm/contact_us) (rch.org.au/derm/contact\_us) for you to attend this workshop.
- [Eczema Association of Australasia Inc](http://eczema.org.au) (eczema.org.au)
- [ASCIA](http://allergy.org.au/patients/skin-allergy/eczema) (allergy.org.au/patients/skin-allergy/eczema)



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