

# Childhood Atopic Eczema

# Your Questions

# Answered...



Contents	Page
<b>Your questions answered</b>	1
Basic questions	1
<b>Treatments</b>	6
Emollients	6
Topical steroids	10
Topical immunomodulators	13
Antihistamines	14
Paste bandages and wet wraps	14
Treating infection	15
Additional treatments	16
Complementary therapies	16
<b>Diet, breastfeeding and weaning</b>	17
Diet	17
Breastfeeding and weaning	18
<b>Practical advice</b>	19
Home, school and play	19
<b>Further information and support from the National Eczema Society</b>	24

# Childhood atopic eczema

## Your questions answered

When a child is first diagnosed as having atopic eczema, parents and carers often have a whole range of questions they would like to ask, but as we all know, there is rarely sufficient time to ask them.

For over 40 years, the National Eczema Society's helpline has been providing information and advice to parents and carers of children with eczema. During this time the type of things we are asked about has remained very much the same: carers want more information about the condition itself, treatments, ideas for helping their child feel more comfortable, and advice on diet, sleeplessness, itching and infection.

*Childhood Atopic Eczema* aims to give the answers to some of the most common questions.

**Eczema Helpline: 0800 0891122**

*(Mon-Fri 8.00am to 8.00pm)*

**Email: [helpline@eczema.org](mailto:helpline@eczema.org)**

**[www.eczema.org](http://www.eczema.org)**

### Basic questions

**My doctor has diagnosed my son as having atopic dermatitis. Is it the same as atopic eczema? What does 'atopic' mean?**

The words 'dermatitis' and 'eczema' mean the same thing. The word 'atopic' means 'out of place'. It is a word used to describe a group of conditions which include eczema, asthma and hay fever.

Atopy, or any atopic condition, is where the body's immune system overreacts to things that would not normally do any harm – often environmental factors that are all around us. For many children, especially those with more severe atopic eczema, the skin is also affected by genetic changes. One example is filaggrin, a structural



protein in the skin that acts differently in atopic eczema, resulting in a defective skin barrier. This causes the skin to be very dry and allows entry to triggers – irritants (e.g. soaps, fragrance, detergents) and allergens (e.g. animal dander, house dust mite droppings and pollens) – which make your child's skin inflamed and itchy.

### What is it like to have childhood atopic eczema?

Atopic eczema is a dry skin condition that may be red, sore and dry. Its chief characteristic is the 'itch', which at times can become almost unbearable, causing a child to want to scratch constantly, especially at night, thereby interfering with sleep. If a child has moderate to severe atopic eczema, they may have red patches of skin (inflammation) and scratch until their skin bleeds. However, since the skin is very dry, it can also crack and bleed of its own accord. Any cracked, raw or bleeding areas are especially vulnerable to infection.

Atopic eczema usually appears during the first few months of life, often starting on the face and scalp. It can be present on any area of the body, but in white children it usually affects the skin creases, neck, back of knees and inside of elbows. There may also be roundish, 50p-shaped areas of eczema, known as 'discoïd eczema'.

Children from Asian, African or Afro-Caribbean families often have different patterns to white children

with eczema. These include eczema around the front of the knees and the back of the elbows (called the 'reverse flexural pattern') as well as in the creases, as seen on white skin. A papular pattern, which appears as fine bumps over the chest and tummy, is also common.

Eczema usually presents with dry skin but it can also be wet and weepy and there may be small blisters. Please see pages 15–16 for information on recognising and treating infection in eczema. If a child has infected eczema, it may be very red and weepy and there may be small blisters.

If the eczema has been persistent, the skin may feel and look thickened in areas where there has been lots of rubbing and scratching. There may be cracks and splits, which can be very painful, especially on the hands, making it difficult to hold a pen or pencil.

Atopic eczema can vary in severity between different children. Some children have dry skin and eczema that can be kept under control with simple treatments, while others may need a variety of more complex treatments. You will get to know what your child's eczema looks like, what treatments will be needed for flares (when the skin becomes hot, inflamed, itchy and sore) and when your child needs to visit a healthcare professional. However, *if the eczema gets worse or looks different, you should always ask for medical help.*



## Is there a cure for atopic eczema?

Unfortunately, at present there isn't, but it can usually be well managed, allowing the majority of children to lead a normal life. The nature of eczema is a cycle of controlled eczema and 'flares'.

## Why does my child have eczema?

Hereditary factors seem to play a role in the development of childhood atopic eczema. There is often a family history of eczema, asthma or hay fever, but this is not always the case. There are also many environmental factors that may play a role. These often include climate, temperature, house dust mites and pollen, as well as individual triggers.

## What are the most common triggers and how can I avoid them?

Triggers are environmental factors that might cause a child's eczema to

worsen or 'flare'. These vary from individual to individual and it can be difficult to identify them as they might not trigger an immediate or noticeable reaction. Some of the most common triggers are:

- Soap and water – Avoid normal soap, and also plain water, which can further damage the already defective skin barrier in people with eczema, causing the skin to become dry and irritated.
- Fragrance – Watch out for fragrance, whether in the form of liquid, powder, paste or airborne.
- Temperature – Being too hot or too cold or going from one temperature to another can trigger a bout of itching. Many children with eczema get hot quickly, so dressing in thin layers can help. Also try setting your central heating thermostat low at around 18°C. You may be surprised at the difference this makes. Meanwhile, family members without eczema can always wear an extra layer!
- Sweat – Aside from avoiding becoming hot and sticky, cotton clothing can be helpful.
- Wet and messy play – E.g. sand, water, paint, clay, some foods and items on the nature table at school. Hands should be moisturised before these kinds of activities, then washed with a soap substitute and moisturised

with emollients (see page 6) afterwards. PVC gloves with a cotton glove liner can help.

- Clothing – Wool and synthetic materials can be particularly uncomfortable. 100% cotton, bamboo or silk garments worn under abrasive materials are best. Avoid garments with seams or labels that can chafe, or cut labels out.
- Pollen – If your child's eczema is affected by pollen, it is advisable to keep the windows closed in the early mornings and evenings when pollen levels are highest. A liberal amount of emollient applied to the skin half an hour before your child goes out (see page 21 for advice on using emollients and sunscreen) will help to provide a barrier against pollen when your child is outside, and washing afterwards will remove any pollen particles that have stuck to the skin or hair. Long sleeves and trousers, a hat and sunglasses, and avoiding bare feet and open-toe sandals will offer further protection. You can use a weather forecasting app to predict the likely pollen count.
- House dust mites – House dust mites are present in all homes and it is impossible to eradicate them. They thrive in warm, moist environments, particularly mattresses. House dust mite droppings can exacerbate eczema and 80% of children with eczema skin prick test positive to them, so may be allergic to them. Washing clothing and bedding at 60°C kills them. For more tips, see page 19.
- Animals – If you have pets, make sure they are kept away from your child's bedroom. Animal dander, saliva and fur can all be irritants, so make sure you clean rooms regularly and that your child washes their hands after stroking or handling animals.
- Food – A few children have food triggers for their eczema, the most common being egg, nuts, sesame and cow's milk. Generally a food allergy is identified before a child is 2 years old. It is important for children to have a good, balanced diet.
- Damp and mould – Spores from rotting vegetation and mould in buildings can cause a reaction in some children with eczema.
- Swimming pools – Chlorine and other chemicals added to swimming pool water can have an adverse effect on the skin, so always apply a protective layer of emollient about 30 minutes before getting into the water. Shower well and apply more emollient on leaving the pool.

## Is childhood atopic eczema common?

Childhood atopic eczema is very common and has increased significantly in the last 50 years. It now affects 15–20% of UK children.

## My child has a problem with light and dark patches of skin due to his eczema. Why is this?

Some children with eczema develop round or oval pale patches that appear when the redness caused by a flare has settled. This is a normal symptom of eczema called *pityriasis alba*. It affects children of all skin colours. Skin colour should gradually return to normal, but the patches can persist for 2–3 years.

The skin of African, Afro-Caribbean and Asian children affected by eczema has areas of light and dark skin shades (which are pigment changes). The dark patches are usually active areas of eczema, which may also be red. The lighter patches often occur when your child's eczema is clearing (and may also be *pityriasis alba*, as described above). These pigment changes may be seen on the skin for several months as they take a long time to settle down. Eventually normal skin pigment should return.

## Can children 'catch' eczema from a child who has it?

No! Eczema is not contagious.

## Will my child grow out of eczema?

Eczema improves for most children, as they get older – about two-thirds are clear by puberty – but they may be left with dry and sensitive skin. Some children continue to have problematic eczema throughout life



while others may find that their eczema goes away sometime during their childhood, only to come back in adulthood. There is no way we can predict the natural course of your child's eczema – the important thing is to take and keep control of it.

## I already have one child with eczema. What is the risk of my next child also having eczema?

If you already have one child with eczema, there is a 25% chance that your next child will also have it. The risk increases if one parent has eczema, and it increases still further if both parents have the condition. However, if the first child has had moderate or severe eczema, it does not necessarily mean that the second child will also have eczema, or to the same degree. Eczema varies in severity from mild to severe and it is quite possible for two children from the same family to have different degrees of eczema or for one child to have eczema and the other never to experience the condition.

# Treatments

## Emollients

**My child has been prescribed emollients, but I am not clear about how often to use them.**

Most children with atopic eczema have dry skin. The skin does not produce enough fat and oils and loses too much water, so it becomes dry and cracked. This is due to a defect in the skin barrier. (A simple way to understand this is to think of skin with eczema as a dry stone wall and skin without eczema as a recently cemented brick wall.) The regular use of emollients (medical moisturisers, which you can get on prescription from your GP, nurse or health visitor) is essential to constantly repair the skin barrier and to help prevent this dryness. You will need to replace the grease and treat dry skin with emollients on an ongoing basis. In other words, *you must use them even when the skin looks good, as this will help prevent further 'flare-ups' of eczema and help to keep the important skin barrier intact.*

Emollients are medical moisturisers which come as ointments, creams, lotions, gels and sprays to be left on the skin, and as washes and bath oils/shower gels to be used as soap substitutes.

You should apply leave-on emollient (see opposite) every 3–4 hours if possible, depending on the type being



used (e.g. ointment, cream or lotion) and the dryness of your child's skin. Creams, lotions and gels need to be applied more frequently than ointments (sprays are ointment-based).

Soap substitutes (which may be emollient wash products or leave-on emollient used as a soap substitute) should be used every time your child washes their hands or body. Your child should not use ordinary soap or bath/shower products as these contain soap-based chemicals, and often fragrances, which dry and irritate the skin. Using water alone will make the skin dry out and should therefore be avoided. After patting the skin dry with a soft towel, your child should then immediately reapply their leave-on emollient.

In some situations, such as cold weather, or mealtimes in the case of babies and small children, eczema can get much worse on the face and hands, so apply plenty of leave-on emollient in advance to protect their skin. Always apply emollients about 30 minutes before swimming, and then shower and reapply afterwards.

Ask your doctor, nurse or health visitor to prescribe large quantities of emollient at a time – a child with atopic eczema will need to use about 250g of leave-on emollient per week (or up to 500g/per week for a bigger child), and more if the eczema is severe. When you find an emollient that your child likes and that suits their skin, ask for it to be on repeat prescription and in large amounts (e.g. a 500g pump or tub and a 200ml bottle for wash products) so you never run out. Small dispensers or tubs are also useful for taking to school and when you are out and about. Large pharmacies sell smaller empty dispensers and tubs.

## Which emollients should I use?

As mentioned above, emollients come in the form of ointments, creams, lotions, gels and sprays, which are left on the skin, known as leave-on emollients, and as bath/shower washes, which are used for washing and rinsed off. Local health authorities often have a shortlist of emollients selected for doctors and nurses to prescribe from. Ask your GP

surgery for the local prescribing guidelines.

Ointments are the greasiest type of emollient. They contain fewer preservatives than other emollients and do not require stabilising additives, which creams, gels and lotions do. (Preservatives and stabilising ingredients can cause an irritant or allergic reaction in some children.) Ointments come in tubs or as sprays. They can give a good seal on the skin and are excellent at restoring barrier function to the skin. They do make clothes oily, but they are a good choice for bedtime and when not wearing special clothes.

Understandably, many parents prefer to be prescribed a cream for their child, which is lighter and is absorbed more quickly into the skin. Gels are similar in consistency to creams.

Lotions are the lightest type of emollient. They are good for areas of infected eczema or for very hairy areas, such as scalps or under the arms.

If your child has moderate to severe eczema, the solution may be to use a cream during the day and an ointment at night.

Some emollients contain added ingredients, such as the humectants urea or glycerol (natural moisturising factors), anti-itch and anti-bacterial additives. Creams and lotions must also contain preservatives and stabilising additives (to keep the oil

and water mixed), which in a few children can cause an allergic or irritant reaction, but preservatives are all essential for product safety and preventing contamination.

Most emollients are available on prescription for children and can also be bought from chemists. Your doctor, health visitor, nurse or pharmacist should be able to advise you. The secret is to find those which suit your child, and this can only be done by trial and error. It is quite possible that you will find that a combination works best – for example, a greasier ointment where the skin is very dry, and a cream or lotion if the eczema is a bit weepy. Try to use any new emollient for at least a month unless you can see it is making the eczema worse. It is a good idea to patch a new product on a small area of eczema-free skin every day for 5 days and check for signs of an allergic or irritant reaction. If the skin reacts, stop using the product.

\*You can contact the National Eczema Society for a list of emollient products broken down into the different types.

### **My daughter says that her cream stings when I put it on her – could she be allergic to it?**

Some children have sensitive skin and complain of stinging or itching when they have their cream put on. This often happens when their skin is very dry, but the feeling should go away after a few minutes. If it does, this is



a sign that it is not an allergy. Even so, you might like to try to find an emollient which doesn't cause this sensation as then your child will be much happier using it.

A few children may have a skin reaction to the preservatives used in creams and lotions, in which case you need to change which ones you use or switch to an ointment instead. Ointments contain fewer preservatives. Examples of ointments that do not contain any preservatives are 50% liquid paraffin in 50% white soft paraffin, white soft paraffin BP, yellow soft paraffin BP, Diprobace ointment, Zeroderm ointment and Hydromol ointment.

Aqueous cream has been found to cause stinging in some children with eczema. This was the subject of research and it was found that the culprit could be a 'soaping agent' called sodium lauryl sulphate (SLS), which is present in the cream. Further research shows that SLS weakens the skin barrier. Several emollients have

been reformulated in recent years to remove SLS, and most emollients available on prescription in the UK don't contain it.

## How do I apply the leave-on emollient?

Apply large 'dots' or 'blobs' of the emollient on to the skin generously a few centimetres apart and then smooth it in, using gentle downward strokes in the direction of hair growth. Never rub it in, as thick emollients sometimes block the hair follicles in the skin, which may cause a mild inflammation or infection of the affected hair follicles. There is good evidence that less topical steroid may be needed if the skin is regularly moisturised.

If you use pots, decant the cream or ointment with a spoon before application to avoid contaminating the product with your fingers. If using creams, a good alternative is to use pump dispensers.

*Bandages and clothing in contact with ointments (paraffin-based products) are easily ignited with a naked flame or cigarette, so please avoid your child going anywhere near naked flames or cigarettes.*

## I have been told to use a soap substitute. Will my child be properly clean?

Ordinary soap and bubble baths degrease the skin and damage the

skin barrier, leading to drying out of the skin. You should also not wash your child with water alone, as water can be very drying.

Soap substitutes are used with water and will clean the skin just as well as soap. A soap substitute may be an emollient wash product or your child's regular leave-on emollient. To use leave-on emollient as a soap substitute, simply apply it to your child's skin and then rinse it off. Bath oils can also help cleanse the skin.

## What about bathing?

Daily bathing is considered optimal for most children with eczema. Bathing should be for less than 20 minutes, as after this time the skin becomes more fragile and subsequent scratching will cause more damage.

The bath water should be warm but not hot – if the water is too hot this may trigger itching. Never use bubble bath as it can be very drying and irritating to some skins. Also, do not wash your child with water alone – plain water can be very drying to the skin. Instead, apply your child's medical moisturiser all over their body before they get into the bath and then simply let them soak and rinse off in the bath. As an alternative to bath oil, add a tablespoon of emollient to the bath as you fill it. The oil and water mix will clean the skin as well as coat it with a film of oil which traps water and prevents the skin drying out.

Emollients can make the bath slippery, so be sure to use a bath mat and clean baths and showers daily to prevent accidents and the build-up of grease. White vinegar is a good cleaning product for the bath.

After bathing, pat the skin dry with a soft towel and reapply the leave-on emollient.

### Can my child shower instead of bathing?

Generally, bathing is recommended, as immersing in an emollient bath is a good way to help moisturise and cleanse the skin. If you do not have a bath or prefer other methods of washing, it is acceptable to apply emollients and then rinse them off using a shower or a bucket of water and a scoop, for example. Younger children may also be 'bucket bathed and rinsed'. Water used for showering and rinsing should be warm but not hot. Ordinary shower gels should be avoided as they can be very drying and irritating to some skins; instead, use emollient shower or wash products or a leave-on emollient as a soap substitute – but take care as they can make the shower floor very slippery.

After washing or showering, pat the skin dry with a soft towel and reapply the leave-on emollient.

\*The National Eczema Society's factsheet on emollients gives further information about emollients and how to use them.

## Topical steroids

### What are topical steroids and are they safe (I heard that they thin the skin)?

Topical steroids are treatments applied to the skin to treat eczema; if used correctly, they are safe and effective. The human body produces its own steroids and these keep any swelling, redness and inflammation in check. The steroids that are used to treat eczema are very like the ones that the body produces.

Topical steroids come in the form of creams, ointments, gels and tapes. They have a generic (drug) name and a product name, and in the UK come in four different strengths (mild, moderate, potent and very potent) – for example, hydrocortisone is mild, Eumovate is moderate and Betnovate is potent (check the patient information leaflet or ask the pharmacist if you are not sure). The chances of any side effects occurring increase with the strength of the steroid.

Topical steroids have been around for over 50 years. In the beginning they were used on children in much greater quantities and potencies than they would ever be used today. Much of the current concern about skin thinning is based on history rather than on how children are treated today. Dermatologists will prescribe topical steroids at the correct strengths and quantities, taking into consideration how severe the eczema

is, how long the topical steroid will be used for, the age of the child and the areas of skin affected, to ensure that skin thinning does not occur, so this problem is very rare nowadays.

Parents and carers who do not use the prescribed topical steroid because of fears of skin thinning, may unwittingly be prolonging the inflammation of the skin and causing needless distress to the child. Scratching and rubbing are almost inevitable if eczema is left untreated and both can cause long-term damage to the skin.

### **My doctor has now prescribed a moderately potent steroid for my child, but previously I was given hydrocortisone, which is very weak. Can you explain why?**

Eczema flares can be treated with prescribed topical treatments, which will be used to reduce the inflammation (redness). The choice of prescribed treatment – e.g. topical corticosteroids and/or topical calcineurin immunomodulators (see page 13) – will depend on your child's age, the area of skin affected and how severe the eczema is.

Eczema can vary in its severity. Hydrocortisone is usually all that is needed for babies and children with mild atopic eczema, but for those with moderate to severe eczema a stronger topical steroid may be needed. Doctors may decide to start with a weak topical steroid and, if



that does not clear the eczema, move up to a moderately potent topical steroid. Alternatively, the doctor may prefer to 'hit' the eczema with a moderate topical steroid first and then, once the inflammation is under control, move down to the weaker hydrocortisone to clear the skin.

Either way of treating the inflammation is correct. However, using a topical steroid that is too weak should be avoided, as the eczema will not clear and your child's discomfort will be prolonged. It also means that in the long run you will end up using more topical steroid. Prompt short-term treatment with the right topical steroid is key.

### **How do I apply the topical steroid?**

Topical steroids should be applied as instructed. This will usually be once a

day, only to the areas of inflammation (i.e. the areas of active eczema). Apply as a thin layer and in smooth, downward strokes. The surface of the skin should 'glisten' once the topical steroid has been applied. Another method of applying topical steroids is the fingertip unit (FTU) application, which is described below.

### How much topical steroid do I need to use?

The amount of topical steroid needed is measured in grams. This can be done by squeezing a strip of cream or ointment along the length of the end joint of an adult's forefinger. This amount is equivalent to half a gram (0.5g), or one fingertip unit, which

will treat an area about the size of two flat adult hands with the fingers together.



**Number of fingertip units for different parts of a child's body**

The infographic features five human figures representing different body parts: Face and Neck, Arm and Hand, Leg and Foot, Trunk (Front), and Trunk (Back including Outdoors). Above each figure is a row of small fingertip unit icons. Below the figures is a table with columns for Age, Face and Neck, Arm and Hand, Leg and Foot, Trunk (Front), and Trunk (Back including Outdoors).

AGE	FACE AND NECK	ARM AND HAND	LEG AND FOOT	TRUNK (FRONT)	TRUNK (BACK INCLUDING OUTDOORS)
3-12 months	1	1	1.5	1	1.5
1-2 years	1.5	1.5	2	2	3
3-5 years	1.5	2	2	3	3.5
6-10 years	2	2.5	4.5	3.5	5
11+ years	2.5	4	8	7	7

## Do I put both moisturiser and topical steroid on the areas of inflammation at the same time? If not, does it matter which I put on first?

It is important that you leave a gap – ideally 20–30 minutes – between applying the two treatments so that the steroid is not diluted by the emollient. There are no set rules about which to apply first, i.e. emollient first and steroid second, or vice versa. The most important thing is to always leave a time gap between applications. However, do not worry if your doctor or nurse recommends putting on the steroid first – both methods are correct, so long as you leave a gap.

\*The National Eczema Society's factsheet on topical steroids gives more information about the different types of topical steroids and how to use them.

## Topical immunomodulators

### I have heard about Elidel and Protopic – what are they?

Elidel and Protopic are the trade names for Pimecrolimus cream and Tacrolimus ointment. They are topical calcineurin immunomodulators (TCIs), also known as 'topical calcineurin inhibitors'. They are prescribed for children and adults as an alternative to topical steroids, especially when the eczema is not being adequately controlled by topical steroids or on areas of the body where the skin is



very delicate, such as the face, neck and groin areas.

In addition, TCIs can be used twice weekly for maintenance treatment. TCIs are licensed for children over the age of two years, but younger children may have them prescribed 'off licence' by dermatologists.

There are no concerns about skin thinning with TCIs. However, they do have some side effects, such as skin irritation and burning sensations. They also increase sensitivity to the sun. Clinical trials have shown them to be safe in the short to medium term, but as they are newer treatments than topical steroids, having been used now for 18 years, it will be a little while before we know if they have any long-term side effects.

\*The National Eczema Society has a factsheet on the TCIs Elidel cream and Protopic ointment.

## Antihistamines

### Could antihistamines help my child?

Antihistamines do not actually treat the itch, as eczema – unlike urticaria (known as skin hives) – is not caused by histamine. However, your doctor may prescribe sedating antihistamines for your child to help them sleep at night. These are meant to be used for a short time when the eczema has flared up, and not as a long-term measure. Antihistamines should be given to the child at least half an hour before bedtime, so that they are not sleepy in the morning. Antihistamine creams are not effective for treating eczema (they can cause a contact allergic reaction).

## Paste bandages and wet wraps

### What bandages can be used for my child's eczema?

Bandages are not in themselves treatments or a cure for eczema. The bandages used in eczema are impregnated with a paste containing zinc oxide or zinc oxide and ichthammol, which are soothing, cooling and relieve irritation. Paste bandages are particularly helpful for rough patches of eczema where the skin is quite thick (called lichenification). They are messy, so a secondary bandage is needed to cover and secure the paste bandage. They can be used for entire limbs or patches of eczema (for example, wrists and ankles).

## What are wet wraps?

Wet wraps use viscose tubular bandages or ready-made garments. They provide a protective, comforting layer and prevent damage from scratching. Wet wrap bandaging is where two layers of bandaging are put on over a layer of emollient. The first layer is a wetted bandage and the second (outer) layer is dry.

*If your doctor or nurse recommends bandages for your child, make sure they teach you how to apply them.*

Wet wrapping and bandaging can be very time-consuming and need a great deal of commitment on the part of the parent or carer.

## How do wet wrap bandages work alongside eczema treatments?

Wet wraps, bandages and garments hinder scratching, help the skin absorb the creams and ointments, cool the skin's surface and reduce itchiness, preventing skin damage. They are prescribed for children who



have moderate to severe eczema, especially those who have severe eczema with abnormal reddening, flaking and thickening of the skin. They are particularly helpful when put on at night as they can help the child to sleep and prevent them scratching while asleep. Wet wraps are a very good way of controlling the eczema quickly. However, if a topical steroid is used under the bandages, more of the steroid is absorbed, so using steroids under wraps or garments should always be medically supervised. Wet wraps can be used without topical steroids longterm to maintain the skin. Wet wraps are not necessary for children with only mild eczema. They should never be used on infected eczema.

\*The National Eczema Society's booklet *Paste Bandages and Wet Wraps* has lots of advice and tips, including step-by-step instructions for bandaging and wrapping techniques.

## Treating infection

### How can I tell whether my child's eczema is infected?

The skin barrier in eczema is compromised (or not as effective as skin without eczema). This, as well as breaking the skin through scratching, makes it very easy for germs to get into the broken areas. Scratching creates further damage and allows more bacteria to enter the skin.

Infection can cause the skin to change, making it look more red, itchy and swollen and may even cause it to weep and form a yellow crust. The skin may also feel hot to the touch and may be more difficult to control with your usual treatments.

If you think your child's eczema may be infected, you should see your GP as soon as possible.

Infection of atopic eczema is usually with a bacterium called *Staphylococcus aureus*, which makes the eczema worse and slower to heal in some children. *Staph. aureus* has been found in greater numbers on the skin of patients with eczema than skin without eczema.

Bacterial infection of atopic eczema in smaller areas can be treated with antibiotics, in the form of a cream, ointment or lotion. A doctor may prescribe a cream which combines a steroid (to damp down inflammation) with an antibiotic. Alternatively, particularly if the infection is widespread, antibiotics to be taken by mouth may be prescribed.

Children with atopic eczema may also have fungal infections, such as candida (thrush) and tinea (known as athlete's foot, although it can affect any area of the body), and a yeast infection (*malassezia*). Fungal infections usually affect only one part of the body and are red and slightly



scaly. They are treated with anti-fungal creams and sprays, and very occasionally tablets.

Viral infections seen in atopic eczema include molluscum and eczema herpeticum. Molluscum appears on the skin as white pearly nodules which gradually disappear over several months. This is a harmless viral infection which is common in toddlers and children of primary school age, but is likely to be more widespread in children with eczema. Occasionally, it can take many months to clear. Eczema herpeticum can be caused by the cold sore virus and spreads very quickly in atopic eczema. It makes you feel unwell and the skin will be sore and tender. *Eczema herpeticum is potentially life-threatening, so if you think your child may have it, you should seek urgent medical advice.*

If your child has several infections in a short period of time, a skin swab may be taken to identify the bacterium or virus which may be

causing the problem and to ensure that your child receives the correct treatment.

## Additional treatments

**I am following all the instructions my GP and dermatologist have given me, but my child's eczema shows no sign of improving. Are there any other treatments I can ask about?**

There are a number of other treatments available to treat more severe atopic eczema which cannot be managed just with the treatments referred to earlier in this booklet. These include steroid tablets, UVB light treatment, Ciclosporin, Azathioprine and Methotrexate. These treatments are usually only prescribed by a dermatologist.

## Complementary therapies

**Can you please advise me about complementary therapies for treating eczema?**

Although complementary therapies are not a cure for eczema, some can be helpful. However, what benefits one person may not necessarily help another. You should let your doctor/nurse know if you are thinking of trying any kind of complementary therapy, and you should not suddenly stop using the treatment prescribed by them.

Safety is also a consideration. People often think that because a cream or product is labelled 'natural', it is safe to use. Herbal remedies can have powerful, and even dangerous, side effects. In addition, some homeopathy creams and Chinese and African herbal creams have been found to contain potent topical steroids and even life-threatening ingredients (e.g. arsenic). If you want to try a complementary therapy, make sure you go to a properly registered practitioner and check that the product you are given has an ingredients list on the pot or tube. Ask in advance how much the treatment course is going to cost.

\*The National Eczema Society has a factsheet giving more information about complementary therapies.

## What about Chinese herbs?

Scientific trials have found that Chinese herbal medicine may sometimes be useful in treating severe atopic eczema where conventional treatments have failed. Unfortunately, most of the scientific trials have been with one product, Zemaphyte, which is no longer manufactured. The general benefits and risks of Chinese herbal medicine are difficult to assess, because a herbalist usually makes up a different combination of herbs for each individual. There have been cases of liver or kidney damage resulting from Chinese herbal medicine, so talk to your dermatologist or GP first and have regular blood tests to check for early signs of possible liver damage. Because

of the potential risks with liver function, Chinese herbal medicines are not advised for children under 5 years. Again, it is important that you go to a practitioner who is properly registered. The Register of Chinese Herbalists [www.rchm.co.uk](http://www.rchm.co.uk) can help you find someone in your area.

# Diet, breastfeeding and weaning

## Diet

**I think my daughter is allergic to something she is eating, which is making her eczema worse. How can I find out?**

We still do not know enough about the role of diet in eczema. Many parents and carers believe that their child's eczema is caused by something in their diet; however, research suggests that children with eczema have a slightly higher chance of having a food allergy but, for the vast majority, food is not an associated factor. Food allergy is also much more likely under the age of 2 years.

Keeping an accurate diary of what your child eats and of the condition of the eczema can be useful. Signs that food may be playing a role in a child's eczema include worsening of the eczema, itching or abdominal pain, or diarrhoea. *If the skin suddenly becomes very red, itchy and swollen,*

*especially if the lips and breathing are affected, urgent medical attention is required.*

Talk to your doctor if you think food allergies may be a factor. Some foods can cause irritation, rather than an allergic reaction, around children's mouths. Never cut out important food groups (e.g. dairy products) without the help of a state-registered dietitian, as children need adequate nutrients such as calcium for their bones, teeth and growth.

### **I am giving my child soya milk instead of cow's milk but the eczema has not improved. What else can I try?**

Children who are allergic to cow's milk are often also allergic to soya milk. Sheep and goat's milk, rice or oat milk are not suitable for children under the age of 1 year as they are nutritionally inadequate. It is highly likely that if a child is allergic to cow's milk, they will also be unable to tolerate sheep, goat or buffalo milk.

### **Should I put my child on a special diet?**

A child should not be put on a special diet unless their history is strongly suggestive of a specific food allergy, or where there is widespread active eczema which is not getting better using emollients and topical steroids. In general, restricting a child's diet is of no benefit in older children with atopic eczema. In infants a 4–6-week trial of egg and milk exclusion may be

recommended by your dermatologist or GP, if allergy is suspected. Advice and supervision from a state-registered dietitian is essential.

## **Breastfeeding and weaning**

### **Should I breastfeed?**

Yes, if you can. Although there is no evidence that breastfeeding prevents the development of eczema, breastfeeding does seem to have a protective effect in relation to the severity of eczema during the early months of life. Where possible, you should breastfeed until the baby is at least 6 months old. Do not alter your diet as a breastfeeding mother unless advised to do so by your dermatologist or allergy specialist.

### **How should I wean my baby?**

The World Health Organization recommends that, whenever possible, breastfeeding should continue for the first six months of life.

Any infant with atopic eczema is at increased risk of food intolerance, so introduce solid foods one at a time in small quantities so that the effects on the eczema can be noted. Good early foods to introduce are baby rice, pure fruits, vegetable and potato purée.

It is recommended that infants are weaned from 6 months of age. Cow's milk, egg, peanuts, tree nuts, sesame seed, mustard seed, soy, celery, lupin (a legume commonly used in France and Mediterranean countries), sulphites (an agent commonly found in dried fruit),

molluscs, wheat, fish and shellfish are foods that have been identified as being the source of the majority of adverse food reactions. They should be introduced in very small amounts (e.g. ½ teaspoon), and no more than one allergenic food at a time. Ideally, allow at least 3 days between these food groups because it can take 3 days for a non-IgE allergy reaction to show. All high-risk foods should have been introduced by the age of 12 months.

Whole nuts should not be introduced to any child, regardless of whether they have eczema, until after the age of 5, as they can be a choking hazard.

*If your baby is in a high-risk group for food allergy, discuss with your GP any concerns relating to weaning.*

## Practical advice

### Home, school and play

#### How can I get rid of house dust mites?

House dust mites live unseen in all our homes. They are tiny creatures found in large quantities in items such as mattresses, carpets and other soft furnishings, and in surface dust. It is not the mites themselves that are the problem but their droppings. When scratched into the skin they will worsen the eczema.

It is impossible to get rid of house dust mites altogether, but there are a few simple measures you can try.

- Wash clothes and bedding at 60°C.
- If your child has soft toys, you can put them in the freezer for 12 hours to kill off the house dust mites.
- Replace old bed mattresses.
- Special mattress and pillow covers are available to protect against the house dust mites. (Make sure they cover the whole mattress/pillow.)
- Vacuum weekly including mattresses and pillows.
- Damp dust all surfaces.

You can consider the following, but they may not be effective for you:

- Keep soft furnishings to a minimum.
- Replace curtains in the child's bedroom with plain roller blinds.
- Wooden, lino or resin flooring is preferable to carpet, but for many people this may not be a practical or financial possibility; it is not necessary to make a change when a child has only mild eczema.

#### Does smoking affect a child's eczema?

Cigarette smoke in an enclosed space can irritate the skin, so avoid smoking around your child. Smoke outside the house and ask relatives and friends to do the same. For advice on stopping smoking, visit [www.nhs.uk/live-well/quit-smoking](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well/quit-smoking)

## **My child's eczema is much worse in the winter – why is this?**

It seems that people with eczema have difficulty controlling their body temperature, which means that they can feel heat or cold much more than the rest of us. Becoming hot and sweaty may make the itching worse, while cold weather will make the skin drier and more likely to crack and become sore. Problems with winter skin are further exacerbated by central heating and the lack of humidity in the home. In general, sunshine improves eczema in most children.

Dress your child in layers, so that they can take them off or put them on as necessary. You may also need to use more emollient in the winter to help prevent the skin from drying out.

## **What sort of clothing should I buy?**

100% cotton or bamboo clothing is best for a child with eczema, but some children can also tolerate silk and smooth, modern man-made fibres, as it is the softness of the material that is important. Wool should be avoided as it is 'scratchy' and can irritate the skin. Nylon next to the skin does not allow it to breathe and so it, too, should be avoided. It can also help to cut the labels out and to buy clothes with no seams as these can also irritate.

## **How should I wash clothes and bedding?**

There is no scientific evidence that a non-biological washing powder is better than a biological one, though many people with eczema say that they prefer non-bio. Wash bedding at a temperature of at least 60°C as this will kill off the house dust mite. Always rinse well, if possible with a double rinse cycle, and avoid fabric conditioners, as these can irritate the skin. As emollient clogs up washing machines, about once a month do an empty wash at a very high temperature, using biological detergent to cut through the grease.

## **My son has eczema and is requesting a pet – should we get him one?**

It is advisable to spend time with an animal before investing in one, to see whether your child is allergic to the animal in question. Visit friends with pets to see if your child reacts.

## **We already have a much-loved dog and my little girl would be very upset if we got rid of it – what can we do?**

The answer really depends on how bad your daughter's eczema is. If she has severe eczema and it is obvious that being in contact with the dog is making the eczema worse, then rehoming the dog may be your best

option. If, however, she only has mild to moderate eczema, then try these tips:

- Keep the dog out of your daughter's bedroom.
- Put a cotton sheet over the animal's favourite chair and remove the sheet before your daughter sits there.
- Brush the dog regularly to remove any loose fur.
- Wash the dog's bedding regularly.
- Vacuum more often.

(All the above points apply just as much to families who have a cat!)

### Can I take my child swimming?

The chlorine and other chemicals in swimming pool water can irritate the skin. Ensure that you put a thick moisturiser, such as Epaderm ointment, Hydromol ointment or 50/50 white soft paraffin/liquid paraffin, on your child 30 minutes to 1 hour before they get into the pool. Alternatively, a sunscreen that contains silicone can be an effective barrier, but make sure your child doesn't react to it by applying it on a patch of skin with no active eczema for 5 days. Shower thoroughly after swimming and apply plenty of your child's usual moisturiser. If the skin is cracked or sore, swimming is best avoided until the skin has healed.

Bathing in the sea often helps eczema, but try it out carefully, especially when the skin is badly broken as the salt water can really sting.

\*The National Eczema Society has a factsheet on Swimming and Eczema.

### We want to take a holiday in the sun – are there special measures we should take?

Many people find that their child's eczema improves in the sun, but it is important to understand that for some children the sun makes the eczema worse. All children need to be protected from burning. Sunscreens are rather like emollients – sometimes it takes some trial and error to find one that suits. However, many people with eczema find that mineral-based sunscreens (containing titanium oxide), which block out the sun, are better than chemical absorbers. If you can, put on a little moisturiser half an hour before putting on a sunscreen as this will prevent the sunscreen becoming diluted by the moisturiser



and will make sure that the sunscreen keeps its protective ingredients. If you are using a moisturiser that is greasy or oily, be careful not to overdo the application of the moisturiser before going out in the sun as this can cause a 'frying' effect. A better solution may be to buy a UV sun suit to minimise the need for sunscreen.

Many children find that heat is a key factor in triggering their eczema. Covering up in light trousers and tops will not only protect against sunburn but will help to keep them cool. Cotton and bamboo clothing are the best materials for keeping a child cool. A wet T shirt can also be useful to cool the skin, but take care in the sun and apply sunscreen underneath as wet material offers less UV protection than dry.

\*The National Eczema Society has a factsheet on Eczema and the Sun.

## My daughter is always scratching! What can I do to help?

There are a number of things you can do to reduce itching and scratching:

- Encourage your daughter to ask for her leave-on emollient to be applied if she starts to feel itchy. Keep cream-based emollients in the fridge. Applied cold they can help more with itching.
- Have a regular skin care routine.
- After washing, pat the skin dry rather than rubbing it.
- Use cotton or bamboo clothing and bedding. (Wool can make the skin itch and synthetic materials tend to make the child feel hot and sweaty, also triggering the itch.)
- Avoid substances that can affect the skin, such as soap and detergents. Some people find that non-biological products cause fewer problems than biological ones.
- Wash clothes and bedding at 60°C to kill house dust mites, and set your machine for an extra rinse cycle. Do not use fabric conditioner.
- Try to distract her from scratching, e.g. with games that occupy her hands, such as cooking, playing cards, jigsaws, lego, etc.
- Try not to say 'Don't scratch', but reward positive behaviour that helps with the itching, such as getting cold emollient from the fridge and applying it.
- Aim for a room temperature between 16°C and 18°C. A warmer room temperature may cause her to itch more.
- The bedroom should be cool and well ventilated, but not cold.
- If you have pets, keep them out of your child's bedroom.
- Encourage her to rub or pinch the itch gently, rather than scratch.
- Keep her nails short to minimise damage to the skin.

- Consider garments such as 'scratch sleeves' at night.

\*The National Eczema Society has a booklet called *Itching and Scratching*.

### Does stress cause eczema?

Stress alone does not cause eczema; however, it can make eczema worse. Equally, eczema is a cause of stress. Learning practical ways of coping with stress can make it more manageable. Try to identify what causes your child stress and work out ways of avoiding or dealing with these situations in advance.

### My daughter is starting school and I am worried her eczema will get worse when I am not there to take care of her. Have you any advice please?

School or nursery should not present problems for the child with eczema if time is taken to ensure that the teachers and nursery staff have eczema explained to them and are given written information about it.

- Well before her first term, approach the school and ask for a meeting to be set up. Explain that your child has eczema and describe what things can be done to manage her skin during the school day. This will help the teacher to understand your child's eczema needs at school. The school nurse may also get involved if a child has severe eczema and

other allergies. If you are at all concerned, contact the school nurse.

- If the teacher can ensure that she does not have a desk in direct sunlight or next to a radiator, this will help prevent her getting too hot and itchy.
- Provide the school with a pump dispenser of her emollient.
- If your child has eczema on her hands, cotton gloves may have to be worn during certain activities such as wet and messy play. However, it is important that children with eczema are helped to lead as normal a life as possible.
- Tell the school if your daughter has to take sedating antihistamines to help her sleep at night, as sometimes they can make a child a little drowsy first thing in the morning.
- Getting a teacher to explain to other classmates about eczema, and that it cannot be caught from someone, can be very useful and help them to understand and accept the child.

\*The National Eczema Society has developed a schools pack for teachers, parents and children called *All About Eczema – an information pack for schools*.

Visit [www.eczema.org](http://www.eczema.org) for pdf versions or call the NES helpline for a printed pack.

# Further information and support from the National Eczema Society

More information than can be given in a booklet of this size is available from the National Eczema Society. We have other booklets including:

- **Itching and Scratching**
- **A Guide for Teenagers with Eczema**
- **Living with Eczema**

Booklets can be ordered from our website or from our Helpline.

Website: [www.eczema.org](http://www.eczema.org)

Helpline: Telephone\* **0800 089 1122**  
(Monday to Friday 8am to 8pm)

*\*Calls are free from UK landlines. Charges vary from mobiles.*

Email: [helpline@eczema.org](mailto:helpline@eczema.org)

We are proud of the wealth of information available on our website and recommend you visit it whenever you need information. It is updated frequently.

Our confidential telephone and email Helpline is at the heart of our work, providing information, support and reassurance to thousands of people struggling to cope with eczema. We are not medically qualified and do not diagnose, prescribe, give medical

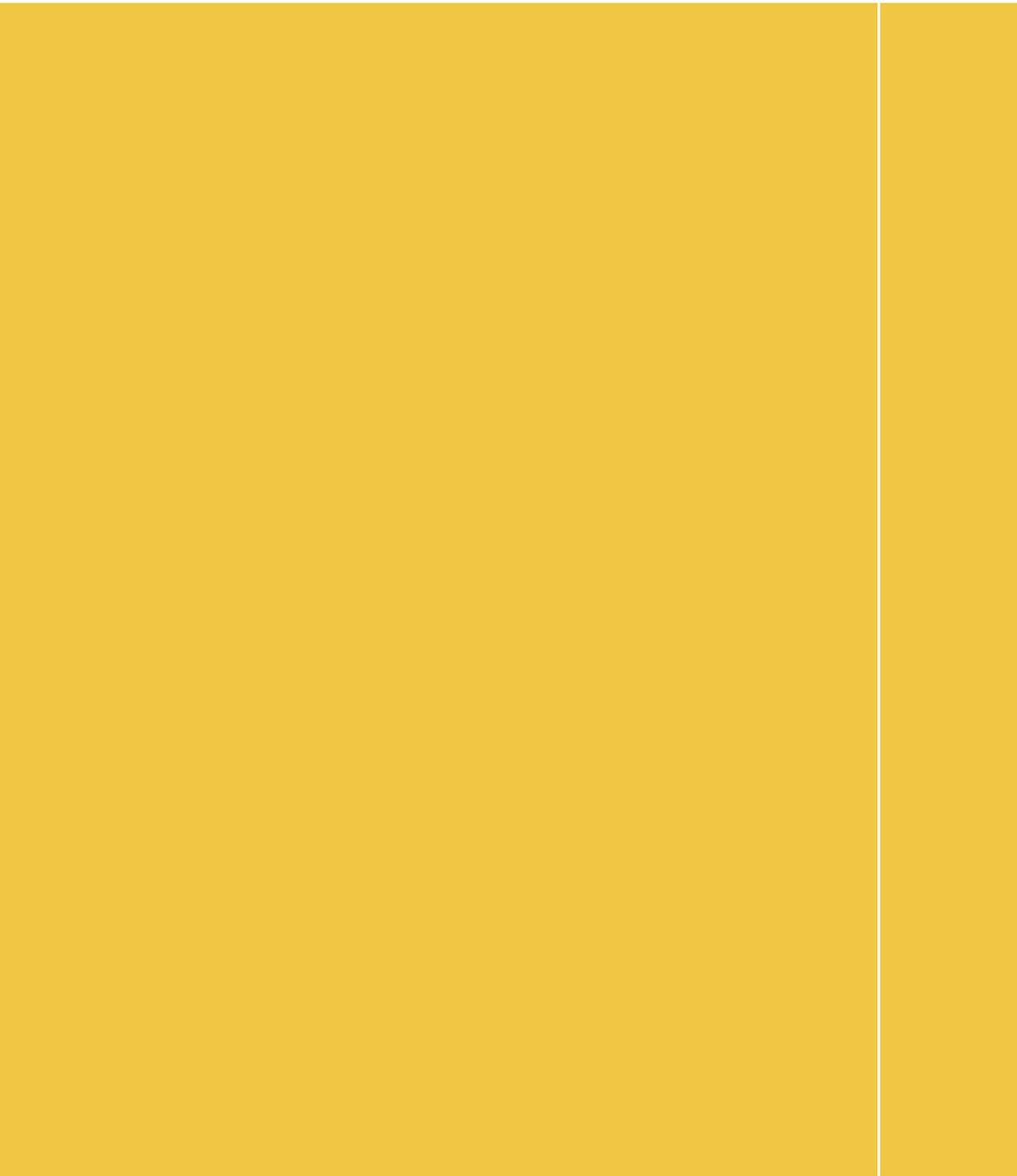
advice or opinions on treatments prescribed by your healthcare professional. We do, however, offer a wealth of practical information about the day-to-day management of eczema and the different treatment options available.

The Helpline is open to all UK residents who are affected by eczema. Please allow five working days for us to reply to you if using email. We are not able to answer queries from non-UK residents as terminology, healthcare systems and treatments may differ in your country of residence, which may cause confusion.

In addition, the National Eczema Society publishes *Exchange*, a quarterly magazine packed with:

- articles on eczema management
- features by people with eczema sharing their experiences
- treatment and research news
- experts' replies to your questions.

You can subscribe to *Exchange* for £20 p.a. at [www.eczema.org](http://www.eczema.org) or by calling our membership team on **020-7281 3553**.





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The information in this booklet is only a general guide. Individual circumstances differ and the National Eczema Society does not prescribe, give medical advice or endorse products or treatments. We hope you will find the information useful but it does not replace and should not replace the essential guidance given by your doctor and other healthcare professionals.

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Revised edition reviewed and updated in May 2018 by Helen Dennis, Dermatology Nurse Adviser to the National Eczema Society.

Designed and produced by [www.dewinter.agency](http://www.dewinter.agency)

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