

When your 'smalls' are no small issue!

When you live with eczema 24/7, putting on any form of clothing can be irritating; but when it's the items that are closest to your skin, it's even more important to do your homework. **Claire Moulds** reports...

A material issue

It goes without saying that choosing the right material is the first step in sourcing underwear that won't leave you sore, chafed and itchy. Cotton remains a firm favourite with those suffering from eczema, thanks to its softness against the skin, the fact that it allows the skin to breathe and the ease with which it can be washed – especially at a high temperature to remove the residual film left by emollient applications and kill off house-dust mites.

Silk is also a popular choice as it helps to regulate body temperature – a key issue for some sufferers – and is also breathable. However, the delicate nature of the material means it can be hard to launder satisfactorily.

Meanwhile, underwear made from bamboo is a relatively new addition to the mix here in the UK but one that offers a fresh solution for those with delicate skin. Soft and breathable, it is said to be unrivalled in terms of moisture 'wicking', speedily absorbing sweat into the material and away from the skin, which is great news for those for whom overheating is a problem.

As with everything to do with eczema though, the devil is in the detail, so always check the inside label of any item for a comprehensive breakdown of exactly what it is made of, as the big marketing slogan on the front may say 'cotton rich' but the small print might list cotton content as only 50%. Even something labelled as 100% cotton may have small print saying 'except the trim'.

You may also need to compromise between the material used and the design itself and accept that, in order to get the style and fit that's least irritating to your skin, you may have to work with a lower percentage of your desired material (e.g. 80% instead of 100%).

Spandex, Lycra or elastane is one such addition that you will often find in the final make-up of an item of underwear, accounting for some of the remaining percentage of content. This is a synthetic fibre, known for its strength and elasticity, which you might be able to tolerate without great problems in small amounts (e.g. 5–10%) or not at all. However, a lack of tolerance might be less due to the material itself and more to the fact that tight, close-fitting underwear causes you to overheat and sweat, thereby making your eczema worse. While not a natural fibre, its presence can nevertheless contribute to an item being lightweight, soft, smooth and supple and prevent the bagging and sagging that can lead to an item rubbing and catching, so there is a trade-off.

While also known for its strength and elasticity, latex (derived from a natural source – the rubber tree) is a known allergen. A latex allergy may present as skin irritation, contact dermatitis, swelling, wheezing and – in severe cases – can trigger anaphylactic shock. Repeated exposure is a crucial factor in the development of a latex allergy. Therefore, if you have a latex allergy, know it is a 'trigger' for you or simply want to avoid it, then check the label



carefully. Some but not all elastic will contain latex – spandex, lycra and elastane don't. If in doubt, ask. Some stores label items as 'latex free' but others don't, even though the items are free from latex. The same applies to nickel if this is an issue for you in terms of fastenings.

Although it's time-consuming, it might be advisable to contact a retailer's head office for official confirmation of what materials are and aren't contained in products. Shop floor staff can be new to the job, new to the underwear department or unsure about where to obtain the correct information and the level of detail that you need. The same goes when buying online and it's probably prudent to avoid any garment that doesn't give you full details of the materials it is made from.

Feel your way

Before you head to the changing room – or the cash desk – have a really good feel of every part of the item. As well as the fact that two items with exactly the same make-up in terms of material (e.g. 80% cotton and 20% elastane) can feel significantly different to the touch, your fingers will quickly identify if a particular design feature is likely to rub and irritate. While pretty to look at, a frilly trim or small bow can quickly become a major irritant.

One feature we are increasingly seeing is a small piece of plastic being used to reinforce seams. Therefore, as well as checking the outside, always turn the item inside out and have a good look from every angle for potential triggers. Alternatively, seam-free designs are available for most underwear.

Regardless of the style you choose, always wash it thoroughly before wearing to remove any loose dye or chemicals used in the production process. Also remove any labels that are likely to catch.

The bottom line

While more than one sufferer we asked in the course of researching this article suggested 'going commando', for most of us finding the perfect pair of pants is the first stage of the underwear battle.

While men seemed to be divided between wearing more close-fitting, supportive pants and choosing boxer shorts, women, for the most part, expressed a preference for a snug fit (but not too tight) to eliminate the issue of excess fabric bunching up and rubbing.

Short styles were the most popular with women, especially in the younger age groups, as they don't cut into the body around the top of the leg or stomach. Both sexes also highlighted the importance of a deep waistband – with fabric-covered elastic – thereby avoiding a thin strip of elastic cutting into the skin.

Products that were recommended to us by sufferers include:

For men

www.marksandspencer.com

T145620D 2 pack pure cotton cellular trunks with StayNEW™

www.dermasilk.co.uk

Gents boxers

bambooclothing.co.uk

BAM113 Men's bamboo briefs

www.patra.com

BXK Silk cotton boxer shorts

www.dreamskinhealth.co.uk

Men's fitted boxers

www.eczemacllothing.com

Mens underpants with opening

www.greenfibres.com

12061 Mens sports organic cotton shorts

For women

www.dreamskinhealth.co.uk

Women's briefs

www.patra.com

2YSB Pack of two silk mix briefs

www.dermasilk.co.uk

Ladies mini shorts

www.eczemacllothing.com

High leg briefs – these have fabric-covered waistbands

www.cambridgebaby.co.uk

Women's pants in pure organic cotton – these have fabric-covered waistbands

www.johnlewis.com

11921119 John Lewis Pima cotton bikini briefs

www.thenaturalstore.co.uk

Bamboo seamless bikini briefs

A crucial support act

For women, bras are a tricky area to navigate as not wearing a bra, or not wearing one with much support due to issues with the material content and/or friction and overheating, can then lead to other problems ranging from breast pain and backache – depending on the size and shape of your breasts – to chafing and irritation.

Common triggers include frills and lace, metal fastenings for the nickel allergic, straps made of a material you can't tolerate – even though the body of the bra is fine – and, for some, underwired designs.

For those with a smaller chest, a crop top or 'sleep' bra with less support than a traditional design might be a solution.

Products recommended to us by sufferers include:

www.thenaturalstore.co.uk

No Balls bamboo seamless strappy bra white

www.noo-noos.com

Sloggi double comfort top

www.figleaves.com

FIG-004609 Figleaves Essence Comfort Caress cotton modal sleep bra

www.patra.com

2YSK Pack of two better fit silk crop tops

www.greenfibres.com

1122-nat-S Organic cotton basic bustier bra

For those requiring a bit more support the challenge is greater and opinions differ around whether underwired bras (assuming the wires are well covered) are better or worse. The following have been recommended:

www.timarco.com

Art No: 601-163-830 Splld: 16630 Swegmark soft supportive organic cotton bra

www.marksandspencer.com

DD-G T334660A 2 pack cotton rich full cup bras

www.johnlewis.com

Royce Grace 513 cotton rich non-wired bra

www.bynature.co.uk

Organic bras essential and elegance underwired bras by Peau Ethique

www.simplybe.co.uk

KT431BJ Naturally close iris cotton comfort full cup cornflower blue bra

www.selfridges.com

67669479 Baserange triangle stretch bamboo jersey soft cup bra

In each case it's important to remember that while a few styles do come with cotton-covered straps (for example,

www.greenfibres.com 1103

Organic cotton sports bra) these are the exception on the market, not the rule. So you may need to resign yourself to getting out a needle and thread to create cotton coverings for the straps, if these aren't suitable for your skin but the rest of the design meets your requirements.

Put your best foot forward

Socks can present a particular challenge, from the material used, to irritating seams, to a fit that is just too tight around sensitive areas, and again elastic/elastane can be troublesome.

Once again, our panel of sufferers had a number of suggestions:

www.hj.co.uk

HJ1351 Diabetic sock cotton

HJ1351L Diabetic sock ladies

www.cosyfeet.com

DI Cotton rich soft hold lightweight seam free socks

OH Extra roomy cotton rich soft hold mid weight seam free socks

www.sockshop.co.uk

Ladies sockshop striped and plain bamboo socks

Pringle jean plain gentle grip cotton socks

Falke Milano knee high socks

www.eczemacllothing.com

Ankle socks no elastic

Tights are also a difficult area to master – a finding confirmed by an absence of suggestions from those patients we spoke to. We do, however, have some ideas for those struggling with both the material used and niggly seams.

www.sockshop.co.uk

Sockshop plain bamboo tights

www.eczemacllothing.com

A77 Ribbed tights 98% organic cotton

www.greenfibres.com

1383-bla-1012 Fine organic cotton tights

www.braintreeclothing.com

WAC2573 Elaina patterned bamboo tights

Some people also find that leggings are a more comfortable substitute for tights, so this is an option worth exploring. They are also easier to find in cotton and bamboo or a bamboo/silk mix with just 5% elastane.

For little ones

While you can apply most of the lessons you've learnt from your own underwear to that of your children, kids do bring their own challenges.

Fastenings (poppers, etc.) are a great scratching aid, so wherever possible make sure these are minimised or not in direct contact with the skin.

The issue of how items are laundered is also a big consideration, especially with young children. While you should still focus on the best fabrics for those with sensitive skin, you might also want to grade these in terms of how robust they are when it comes to repeated washing at high temperatures, before investing heavily in items that may not be up to the job.

Once again, our 'expert patients' had plenty of suggestions for where to source suitable items:

www.johnlewis.com

71023012 John Lewis boy cotton briefs

31608731 John Lewis baby organic cotton short sleeve bodysuit

www.cambridgebaby.co.uk Organic cotton children's pants

www.eczemacllothing.com

C372 Girl's pants

C441 Girl's pants

Boys boxer pants

Soft ribbed tights 100% cotton

www.greenfibres.com

1552-purp-92 Organic cotton plain briefs for children