We know how hard it can be living with eczema at any age but for young people it can be a particularly steep learning curve as they try not only to understand their condition but also to cope with the frustrations it can bring – all set against a backdrop of the many challenges already associated with growing up.

That’s why we’re delighted to launch the first in a series of three articles especially for our younger readers.

Designed to either be read by children on their own or with Mum and Dad, each one will examine a particular aspect of eczema that young people tell us they need help with.

As always, we’d love to hear from both children and their parents what they think of this latest addition to Exchange and welcome any feedback you may have.

There is nothing you or your parents did or didn’t do that caused you to have eczema. Having eczema DOES NOT mean you are unclean. And remember that eczema is NOT contagious – you can’t ‘catch’ it or ‘give’ it to someone else.

The look of eczema

Eczema can look different on everybody. It can be found anywhere on the body, including behind the knees, in the bend of the elbows, on hands, feet, arms, legs, the trunk of the body, face, behind ears, on the scalp – anywhere!

Eczema can look like red, inflamed patches, cracked or flaky skin, scabs, thickened areas of skin or the skin might be discoloured or have lost its colour. If the skin has become infected, it may have little fluid-filled bumps that oozed or are covered with yellow crust.

The feel of eczema

Eczema can cause skin to feel VERY itchy, painful, and raw. It can cause peeling that can feel very sore. And the skin at your joints may be stiff and difficult to bend.

What causes the itch?

When we come into contact with things that our skin or bodies are sensitive to (TRIGGERS) our skin releases natural chemicals. These chemicals act as a barrier to protect the skin from whatever is invading it. Imagine it like your body’s army (your body’s natural chemicals) fighting against the invaders (the triggers). We’ll talk more about triggers in the next issue.

The problem is that these chemicals also cause itching, redness and swelling. In people who don’t have eczema, the chemicals go away. In people with eczema the skin cells don’t switch off – they keep producing chemicals that make the itching continue.

The problem gets worse when you scratch or rub the itchy area of skin. Scratching aggravates your skin and causes the cells to release even more chemicals. Once the skin has been broken you are at risk of infection and it may cause a flare-up. This makes you itch even more! We call this the ITCH-SCRATCH CYCLE.
My scratch diary!
Many children find it helps them to keep a record of how much they have been scratching that day. Why not start your own ‘scratch book’?

The idea is that you record how much you scratch in the morning, afternoon and evening so that you can see when you are most likely to scratch and maybe work out why. The diary also asks you to write down anything that helped you to stop scratching so that you can remind yourself to use these things again.

You could use this template →

The Itch–Scratch Cycle

Instead of scratching your skin you could try gently PRESSING, TAPPING or PINCHING your skin instead, until you beat the urge to scratch it. Or you could clench your fists gently or squeeze a squiggy ball for 30 seconds.

Many people with eczema say it is much more helpful if the people around them suggest things they can do, such as ‘tap your skin’ or ‘squeeze your fists tight’ rather than telling them not to do things, such as ‘do not scratch’ or ‘stop scratching’.

Distraction!

Distraction can be a very useful tool to have in your tool-kit to beat eczema. Distraction means CONCENTRATING ON SOMETHING ELSE so that you don’t notice your skin is itching.

Here are some ideas children use to distract themselves from the itch:
- Watching TV
- Playing with friends
- Singing songs
- Playing counting games
- Playing on the computer
- Painting or crafts

Make a list of your top five distraction activities for when your skin is itching. Ask your friends and family if they can make any good suggestions.

NEXT ISSUE – time for some detective work!
What makes your eczema worse and what makes it better?