



Leaflet: Eczema - questions and answers

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This information sheet gives brief answers to some of the many questions that the National Eczema Society is frequently asked about eczema and its treatment and management. Further details about the services provided by the National Eczema Society and the support that is available for people with eczema and their carers are at the end

What are eczema and dermatitis?

Eczema and dermatitis are now generally used to describe the same skin condition. Eczema is one of the commonest reasons for dry, sensitive skin, taking its name from the Greek ECZEMA, meaning to boil. This is an apt description of the inflamed rash, which is often accompanied by an intense itching, which makes scratching almost inevitable. One person in ten has eczema at some time in their life, and it affects all age groups.

Is there just one type of eczema?

No, there are many, but everyone with eczema experiences similar, unpleasant symptoms. These are some of the main types of eczema:

Atopic

It is possible to develop atopic eczema at any age but it is most commonly found in babies and young children. Atopic eczema is thought to run in families and it is part of a group of atopic conditions which include eczema, asthma and hay fever. Commonly symptoms include an overall dryness of the skin, usually accompanied by an overwhelming itchiness. Skin may become inflamed and cracking and splitting may occur making the skin prone to infections.

Seborrhoeic

There are two types of this condition: one is most commonly seen in babies, the second is fairly common in younger adults. Areas affected tend to be the oily parts of the body such as the scalp, face, groin and sensitive skin, chest. Seborrhoeic eczema is not normally itchy.

Discoïd

This condition is usually confined to the arms and legs and consists of scaly, itchy, coin-shaped patches that can blister and weep.

Varicose

This is a condition of the legs, commonly found in the elderly and people with varicose veins.

Contact

There are two types -- irritant and allergic. Irritant is caused by exposure to substances such as soaps, detergents, engine oils, hair dyes and bleaches. Allergic is caused by a specific sensitivity to a material such as nickel, chrome or rubber. Our Information Pack and Information Sheets contain more of these details. However, always consult a GP or specialist for a precise diagnosis.

I have emollients to treat my baby's eczema. Can you explain what they are for?

Emollients are basically simple moisturisers used to combat the dryness of eczema and to protect the skin from further water loss. There is a wide range of products of this kind and it may take you some time to find the one that is suitable for your skin. The National Eczema Society can help you by providing full information about what is available and keeping you up to date with new products.

Our young son has just been diagnosed with atopic eczema. We are using emollients on his skin and in his bath but is there anything else we can do to help him?

Once a good skincare regime is in place it is important to look at the other areas of life where someone may be coming into contact with things that could irritate and exacerbate their eczema. People with eczema often find that they are more comfortable in cotton clothing, it is unlikely to irritate the skin and will help to avoid overheating of the skin. We can provide comprehensive details regarding stockists and manufacturers of cotton clothing. Laundry products can also contain ingredients that may irritate the skin, non-biological products are usually best although for some people a product specifically for sensitive skins is preferred. For some people with eczema the house dust mite may be a problem; we can provide advice regarding possible methods for controlling their effect.

Further information and practical advice on the management of eczema is contained in our members' Information Pack.

I have been prescribed steroids by my doctor for my eczema, but have heard that they can be dangerous. Should I be using them?

Potent steroids may cause side effects if they are used incorrectly over long periods of time. However, they play an important role in treatment and if used correctly the risks of side effects are small.

We have had a cat for five years but our youngest child has developed atopic eczema and we have been advised to get rid of the pet. We are very worried about the effect this will have on the whole of the family. Is there anything else we can do to minimise the effects of the cat?

The problem with furry pets comes mainly from the shed skin or "dander" in the coat. Saliva and urine can also cause problems. However, when a pet has been in the family for a long time its sudden removal may not be feasible. Restricting the cat's movements within the house can be difficult but it is very important that the animal is not allowed to go into the child's bedroom. It is also important to realise that people may transfer hair and dander via their clothing.

It has been suggested that weekly bathing of cats can help to reduce their allergenic effects. However, anyone with a cat can anticipate the type of problems this may cause! A wipe down with a damp cloth may not have quite the same effect but is used by some families to reduce the problem.

I am worried that the rest of the family is feeling left out as a result of the constant attention required to try and manage our young son's eczema.

Extra time and attention will inevitably be required in caring for a child with eczema. However, it is important that time is still set aside for other members of the family. Treatments such as oily baths can be shared and the skin of other children moisturised, minimising to some extent the differences in care and attention given to siblings. It is also important that children with eczema are encouraged to join in with the activities of the whole family - overheating may intensify the itch but often the play will distract your child and overcome the itchiness.

We are on a low income and wondered if there were any benefits that could help us with the financial burden of coping with a young child with severe eczema.

Disability Living Allowance is the main benefit to which your child may be entitled. Further details are available from your local social services department and the National Eczema Society can provide advice with regard to the type of information required to fill in the application form.

Is it possible that my daughter has caught the condition from her friend at school?

Eczema cannot be caught from other people, in fact people with the condition are more at risk from other people since their skin is often cracked and broken leaving it open to possible infection.

My first child has severe eczema. What is the likelihood of our next child developing the condition?

It is thought that people inherit the potential to develop an atopic condition such as eczema, asthma or hay fever, it will then take a trigger of some kind to bring out the condition. There is no straightforward pattern of inheritance but it seems to be the case that if one of your children already has the condition then your next child has a one-in-four possibility of developing eczema. However, it is important to bear in mind that in the majority of cases eczema is a fairly mild condition and another child may not necessarily be affected to the same extent as the first.

I would like to know more about the use of Chinese medicinal plants in the treatment of eczema

The National Eczema Society part-funded research into the use of Chinese medicinal plants in the treatment of eczema and has produced an information sheet on this topic. This may be obtained by sending an SAE to the address given below or by contacting our information line. This is open from Monday to Friday, 9.00 am - 6.00 pm, telephone 0171-388 4800.

As a family we all enjoy going to the local swimming pool. However, I am now worried that the chlorine in the water is affecting my young son's eczema.

The chlorine in a swimming pool may irritate the skin of someone with eczema. To minimise these affects a barrier cream of some kind, for example Vaseline, can be applied to the skin before entering the pool. It is also important to ensure that the child's skin is rinsed thoroughly under running water after leaving the pool and the usual emollient is applied.

The details given in this information sheet represent brief answers to some of the questions we are frequently asked. The advice given should not be seen as standing alone, but as an introduction to the full range of information and support given in our membership package. If you are not already a member of the National Eczema Society, we would like to invite you to write to the address below to find out more about the benefits of membership. The Society is here to extend a helping hand to enable you to cope with the day-to-day problems of living with eczema, and to provide you with all the practical support you need. Members of the National Eczema Society receive:

- ◆ Our new Member's information Pack covering all aspects of the treatment of eczema and good skin care management, together with specific details for babies and children, teenagers or adults.
- ◆ Exchange, our quarterly journal with topical articles about eczema, news, advice, tips and letters from other members, and details of our local groups and activities.
- ◆ Access to our Information Service.
- ◆ Support and advice from our locally based network of contacts.

The National Eczema Society is funded entirely by voluntary donations and subscriptions. For further details please send an SAE to:

**The National Eczema Society,
163 Eversholt Street,
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Telephone 0171 388 4097
Information line 0171 388 4800**

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