

Causes

The basic problem is that the skin is abnormally dry (cannot hold onto moisture normally), which causes itching and, in turn, scratching. The end result is dry, scaly patches of irritated, red skin. In infants, it can be located all over the body, but may be worse on the face, backs of the arms and backs of the legs. In older children, it is more commonly located in the creases of the elbows, knees, wrists and ankles.

Eczema is a chronic (long term) skin condition that can be treated, but not cured. Eczema needs to be taken care of everyday, not just when it looks "bad". If you follow the care instructions outlined below, the eczema will improve, but if you stop, it will return. About half of children outgrow eczema after few years. About 40% of children have eczema as they get older, but in a mild form. About 10% will have significant problems with it into adulthood. The tendency to get eczema is inherited from the parents. About 75% of children with eczema will develop allergies (such as hay fever) or asthma.

Treatment

Since the basic underlying problem in eczema is abnormally dry skin, the most important thing to do is to **moisturize the skin every day**. Often more than once a day is necessary. The following steps are recommended to achieve good control of the dryness and itching:

BATHS: Daily baths seem to help eczema. Place the child in a lukewarm bath daily. Clean just the dirty areas in younger children. When using soap, use a mild one such as Dove, Neutrogena, Basis, or Cetaphil lotion. If the hair needs to be washed, use shampoo at the end of the bath. If the skin is very irritated, adding some salt to the water will increase comfort (about ½ cup of salt to a ½ bathtub of water).

Bleach baths twice per week have been shown to help. Add ¼ cup of laundry bleach (regular strength, 6% bleach) to a ½ bathtub of water and mix it in before your child gets in the bathtub. If using a baby tub, use 1 teaspoon (5 ml) bleach per gallon of water. Let them soak for 10 minutes, avoiding getting any in eyes or hair. Towel them off (it will discolor the towels) and moisturize them immediately.

MOISTURIZING CREAMS: Within three minutes of getting out of the bath, pat the skin dry and apply a moisturizing cream to the entire body. Creams are much better than lotions, and generally, the greasier the better. Some good moisturizing creams are:

- Eucerin Cream
- Moisturel Cream
- Aquaphor Ointment
- Vanicream
- Aveeno Skin Relief Cream
- Vaseline Petroleum Jelly

These should be applied after the bath and at least once more per day. For infants with eczema on the face apply some type of protective barrier, such as Vaseline, to keep the saliva, food, and milk off the skin.

STEROID CREAMS: These are necessary when the eczema has "flared" (when it is very scaly or red). Steroids should be applied before moisturizing the skin. On the face, only 1% hydrocortisone (ie. Cortaid) should be used. On the body, especially in older children, a prescription steroid cream may be needed. Steroid creams are usually used for only 2 weeks at a time. After 2 weeks, continue to apply moisturizers but stop the steroid cream. Continuing steroids for too long leads to side effects like thinning of the skin. After you have stopped the steroid cream for a couple of weeks, you may start again if the eczema flares.

WAYS TO PREVENT SCRATCHING:

- Keep the child's fingernails short and neatly trimmed.
- Keep the affected skin covered as much as possible. For example, full-length and even footed pajamas and mittens or cotton socks on the hands at night will protect the skin.