

Eczema - Caring for Dry Skin

Eczema (also called "atopic dermatitis") is a skin disease. Eczema causes dry skin that can itch, get red and crack. In adults, eczema usually develops on the insides of the elbows, the backs of the knees, the hands and the backs of the elbows. In young children, the rash is most often on the face. Eczema is most common in people whose relatives have allergic conditions like asthma or hay fever. Up to 10 percent of children get eczema.

What causes eczema?

The exact cause of eczema isn't known. It may be caused or made worse by these things:

- Soaps, laundry detergents and perfumes.
- Scratchy clothes (like wool) can also irritate the skin.
- Allergens like dust mites, pollens, pets or even foods.
- Low humidity or high humidity and sweating.

Skin care is very important!

- Bathe less frequently. Use warm water instead of hot water.
- Use soap only when it's necessary. Most people need soap only for the armpits, hands, face and groin. Don't lather up your arms legs, chest and back unless you can't rinse the area clean with water.
- Use a mild soap like Dove or Ivory, or a non-soap cleanser like Cetaphil.
- Pat your skin dry with a soft towel. Rubbing provokes itching.
- Apply a moisturizer immediately after bathing. This can trap water in the top layers of the skin. Use a hypoallergenic moisturizer like Lubriderm, Nutraderm, Eucerin, Keri, Moisturel, Curél or, Aquaphor. It is even better if you apply the moisturizer several times a day.
- Drink lots of water. Water helps keep the skin moist.
- Use a mild laundry soap and try running your clothes through two rinse cycles.
- Wear gloves when you work with cleaning products that might irritate your skin.
- Wash your sheets in hot water (and often) to get rid of dust mites. Use dust-proof covers on pillows, box springs and mattresses.
- Wear loose clothes made of cotton that "breathe."

Can medicine help eczema?

Steroid creams and ointments can help control eczema. But there can be serious and permanent side effects if they are used improperly. This is especially important in sensitive areas (face, armpits, genitals) when potent prescription steroids are used. Even over-the-counter hydrocortisone can cause problems if used for too long. If you aren't sure -- see your doctor. Sometimes antihistamines and antibiotics are required to control eczema.

Itching is a problem. What can I do about it?

- Try not to scratch.
- Keep fingernails short and clean. Consider wearing gloves at night. For children, knee-high socks work better than gloves because they're harder to pull off during sleep.
- Keep your hands busy. People scratch more when they have nothing else to do with their hands.
- Antihistamines (e.g. Benadryl) may help with the itching. Ask your doctor about this.
- Try using oatmeal bath products, like Aveeno, to help make your skin less itchy.