

Eczema

There are many causes of eczema (atopic dermatitis), a skin rash that may cause severe itching. Children with eczema often have allergies. Some children “outgrow” eczema, while for others it is a lasting problem. Children with atopic dermatitis have high rates of other allergic diseases, including asthma and hay fever (allergic rhinitis).

What is eczema?

Eczema is a chronic skin disorder—a rash that comes and goes and can cause severe itching. Atopic dermatitis is the most common cause of eczema in children. It is often seen in children with allergies or whose families have lots of allergies.

Eczema is very common, affecting more than 10% of children in the United States. Especially when it appears in babies and young children, eczema may be the first sign that your child has allergies.

What does it look like?

- An itchy skin rash. The itching may be severe, making it difficult for your child to sleep.
- The rash may look red and scaly or crusting. Small blisters may occur, especially in African-American children.
- The skin is often dry, including the hair and scalp. The skin may also become thickened.
- The rash can appear in many different parts of the body. In babies, it often occurs on the cheeks and forehead, then spreads to the trunk, arms, and legs. As children grow, the rash may spread to other areas and become quite large. In older children, the rash commonly occurs in the elbow crease and behind the knees, wrists, and ankles. In teens and adults, eczema may appear on the face, neck, and back.
- The skin where the rash is located may become darkened. This discoloration may take some time to clear up.
- The rash may get worse in areas where your child scratches. The skin may become infected.

What causes eczema?

Atopic dermatitis may be caused by anything your child is allergic to, including:

- Foods, such as peanuts and eggs.
- Pollen—eczema may occur at the same time or before symptoms of asthma or hay fever.
- House dust mites.

Other causes may lead to eczema or make the skin rash worse. Some examples are:

- Anything that irritates the skin, such as wool clothing, skin lotions or ointments, or household cleaners or chemicals.
- Weather extremes—especially high heat and humidity, causing increased sweating.
- Sometimes no specific cause of eczema is found.

What are some possible complications of eczema?

- Occasionally, areas of eczema may become infected with bacteria. If so, the skin may become redder and more crusty and start oozing.
- Skin problems related to scratching, including scarring.
- Children with eczema have high rates of other allergic diseases, including potentially severe allergic reactions.

What puts your child at risk of eczema?

- Allergies, including food allergies, asthma, or hay fever (allergic rhinitis).
- Having parents or other family members with allergies.
- Certain types of clothing: wool may irritate the skin, while nylon or other synthetic fabrics trap sweat.
- Extremes of weather, especially high heat and humidity.
- Girls are affected about twice as often as boys.

Can eczema be prevented?

- There is no known way to prevent eczema.
- If the cause is allergies, avoiding exposure to whatever your child is allergic to may help to reduce eczema outbreaks.
- You can learn to take care of your child’s skin and to avoid anything that has triggered or worsened eczema outbreaks in the past:
 - Avoid any products that irritate your child’s skin, such as wool, harsh soaps, and perfumes.
 - Use mild, unscented soaps. Right after bathing, put a nonperfumed moisturizer on the skin.
 - Wash new clothes before your child wears them.
 - Have your child wear loose, cotton clothing to absorb sweat.

- Sports involving intense sweating or heavy uniforms or equipment may make eczema worse. Rinse off skin after swimming.
- To reduce damage caused by scratching, keep your child's fingernails short. Wearing soft gloves at night may be helpful.

How is eczema treated?

- If your child's eczema is caused by a food allergy, avoid that food. Some common food allergens can be difficult to avoid (for example, peanuts or soy).
- If the cause is allergy to house dust mite, special pillow and mattress covers may be helpful. Keep household dust under control.
- *Simple treatments* can help to keep your child's eczema under control:
 - Use moisturizers. Use unscented moisturizers, because perfumes may irritate the skin.
 - For more severe eczema, have your child soak in luke-warm water for 20 minutes, then apply a moisture-retaining skin ointment (such as Vaseline, Aquaphor, or Eucerin).
- *Steroid creams or ointments* are an important part of treatment.
 - To avoid side effects, these medications should be used carefully, as directed by your doctor.
 - Avoid using strong steroids on the face or diaper area, unless recommended by your doctor.

- Steroid creams or ointments usually don't interfere with your child's growth, unless used at high doses for a long time.
- Other topical treatments may be helpful:
 - Products containing coal tar can help to keep your child's eczema under control. They can also help to reduce the amount of steroid cream needed.
 - Protopic cream (generic name: tacrolimus) and Elidel cream (generic name: pimecrolimus) are helpful and are not steroids.
 - Treatment with special ultraviolet light (phototherapy) is sometimes recommended.
 - Antihistamines such as Benadryl (generic name: diphenhydramine) may be used to control itching. Because these drugs cause drowsiness, they may be particularly useful at night.
- If your child has severe eczema, a visit to a dermatologist (a specialist in treating skin conditions) may be helpful.



When should I call your office?

Call our office if:

- Your child's rash does not improve with treatment, or if there are signs of infection (redness, crusting, oozing).
- Your child develops fever or uncontrolled itching during a flare-up of eczema.