Eczema
What it is and how to treat it

What is eczema?

Eczema is a skin inflammation that results in redness, itchiness, and crusty or scaly areas that may leak fluid. It is a chronic condition, which means it lasts a long time and can recur. Eczema is also called atopic dermatitis. It usually starts in early childhood and improves as people get older. Some people with eczema continue to have severe symptoms into adulthood.

Why does eczema develop?

We do not know why some people develop eczema and others do not. But, it does tend to run in families. Some people with eczema also have asthma and seasonal allergies, such as hay fever. These 3 conditions are called the atopic triad. These 3 conditions together also run in families.

How is eczema treated?

There is no cure for eczema, but there are ways to treat and control the symptoms. All the treatments are meant to keep your skin from getting irritated. Skin irritation can occur from dryness, from scratching, or from infection. There are 4 basic kinds of treatment, and you must do all 4 to reduce skin irritation. The 4 treatments are:

1. Treat dry skin. Dry skin becomes irritated easily, and it is often itchy. To reduce dryness:
   - Do not use harsh soaps, and do not wash your skin more than needed.
   - Avoid fabrics that irritate your skin. Cotton is recommended rather than wool or polyester.
   - Use plenty of moisturizer twice a day, and always after bathing. Greasier moisturizers work the best, but they may be harder to apply. Try different kinds to find the moisturizer that works best for you.
   - For more information, ask your doctor or nurse for the handout on how to treat dry skin.
2. **Treat itchy skin.**
   - Antihistamines such as **diphenhydramine** (Benadryl) and **hydroxyzine** (Atarax and Vistaril) work best to control itchiness, but they also make you sleepy. It is best to use them only at night. Take enough in the evening to make you sleepy 1 hour after taking it, but not so much that you are groggy when you get up in the morning.

   Note: Non-sedating antihistamines (ones that do not make you sleepy) work well for allergies, but they do not help control itching.

3. **Treat the inflammation.** Use these ointments and creams on red, scaly areas:
   - **Steroid ointments and creams:** Use these twice a day until the redness is gone. Then use once a day for 1 week so that the rash does not recur right away.

   Weaker steroids (like **desonide** or **hydrocortisone**) are usually recommended for sensitive areas such as your face, neck, armpits, and groin, where your skin is thinner to start.

   Stronger steroids (like **clobetasol**, **betamethasone**, **desoximetasone**, or **triamcinolone**) work faster, but they can thin your skin and cause other side effects. Use them only as instructed by your doctor.

   In general, steroid ointments work better than steroid creams.

   - **Non-steroid treatments:** **Tacrolimus** (Protopic) ointment and **pimecrolimus** (Elidel) cream are 2 non-steroid treatments that may be safer than steroid treatments to use long term. But they are expensive and can cause burning for the first week they are used. Also, because of safety concerns, they are not recommended for using on children younger than 2 years old.

4. **Treat the infection (if present).** Skin inflammation from eczema can lead to skin infections.
   - The 2 most common infections are caused by **staphylococcus** (also called “staph”) and **streptococcus** (also called “strep”). These are bacteria (germs) that we normally have on our skin, but they can make flare-ups of eczema worse.

   - If your doctor is concerned about infection, you may be advised to treat your skin inflammation with an antibiotic cream such as **mupirocin** (Bactroban). Or, you may be advised to take an oral antibiotic such as **cephalexin** (Keflex) or **trimethoprim/sulfamethoxazole** (Bactrim or Septra).