

Use a thick moisturiser ointment as a soap substitute for cleaning. You can also rub this into particularly dry areas of skin. After a bath or shower it is best to dry by patting with a towel rather than rubbing. Then apply a light moisturiser cream to any remaining dry areas of skin. Between baths or showers, use a moisturiser cream as often as seems necessary.

A common mistake is to stop using moisturisers when the skin appears good. Patches of inflammation, which may have been prevented, may then quickly flare up again.

If you use steroid cream, continue to use moisturisers as well.

You cannot overdose or overuse moisturisers. They are not active drugs and do not get absorbed through the skin.

Note: moisturisers used for eczema tend to be "bland" and non-perfumed. Occasionally, some people become sensitised to an ingredient. This can make your skin worse rather than better. If you suspect this, make an appointment in the **FAST TRACK** clinic

for advice. There are many different types of moisturisers with various ingredients. A switch to a different type will usually sort this uncommon problem.

Topical steroids (a steroid cream ointment)

If inflammation flares up, a topical steroid is usually advised. Steroids work by reducing inflammation in the skin. Topical steroids come in differing strengths. In general you should use the lowest strength which works. Follow the instructions as directed by your doctor or nurse.

What about side-effects of steroid creams?

Long term use of topical steroids (more than several weeks at one time) may cause problems in some cases. For example, the skin may become "thin" and bruise easily. The stronger the cream, the more likely that problems may develop. However, in many cases, a course of a topical steroid for 1-4 weeks clears a flare-up of inflammation. This can be repeated from time to time to treat each flare-up. Intermittent use of topical steroids in this way is thought to be safe.



POPLAR GROVE
P R A C T I C E

Patient Information Leaflet

Eczema

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What is eczema?

Eczema is sometimes called dermatitis, which means “inflammation of the skin”. There are different types of eczema, with the most common being atopic eczema. With this type there is a typical pattern of skin inflammation which causes the symptoms.

What are the symptoms of eczema?

- ❖ The skin usually feels dry
- ❖ Some areas of the skin become red and inflamed. The most common areas affected are next to skin creases such as the front of the elbows and wrists, back of knees and around the neck. However, any areas of skin may be affected. The face is commonly affected in babies.
- ❖ Inflamed skin is itchy. If you scratch a lot, it may cause patches of skin to become thickened.
- ❖ Sometimes the inflamed areas of skin become blistered and weepy.
- ❖ Sometimes inflamed areas of skin become infected.
- ❖ In mild cases, a flare up may cause just one or two small mild patches of inflammation. Often these are behind the knees, or in front of elbows or wrists. Flare-ups may occur only occasionally.

Who has eczema?

Most cases first develop in children under the age of five years. It is unusual to first develop eczema after the age of 20. About one in six school children have some degree of eczema. However, in about two in three cases, by the mid teenage years the flare-ups of the condition have either gone completely or are very much reduced. But there is no way of predicting which children will still be affected as adults. About three in 100 adults have eczema.

What causes eczema?

The cause is not known. Some cells of the immune system release certain chemicals under the skin surface which causes the inflammation. But it is not known why this occurs. Eczema has become more common in recent years. There are various theories for this. Factors which may play a role include: changes in climate, pollution, allergies to house dust mites or pollens, diet, infections, or other “early-life factors”. However, there is no proven single cause. There may be a combination of factors which cause the immune system to react and cause inflammation of the skin.

What are the usual treatments for eczema?

The three common treatments are:

- ❖ Avoid irritants to the skin wherever possible
- ❖ Moisturisers - used every day which help to prevent inflammation developing.
- ❖ Steroid creams - used when there is a flare-up of skin inflammation.

Avoiding irritants

It is commonly advised to:

- ❖ Avoid soaps, bubble baths etc. when you wash. Instead, use a soap substitute plus a bath or shower emollient (see below).
- ❖ Wear cotton clothes next to the skin rather than irritating fabrics such as wool. However, it is probably the smoothness of the material rather than
- ❖ the type of material which helps. Some smooth man-made fabrics are probably just as good as cotton.
- ❖ Avoid getting too hot or cold.
- ❖ After you wash clothes with detergent, rinse them well. Some “biological” detergents are said by some people to be irritating. But there is little proof that commonly used detergents which are used in the normal way make eczema worse.

Pets

Some parents report that symptoms in children become worse when they are in close contact with pets. It may be worth thinking about not having pets.

House dust mite

Many children with eczema are allergic to house dust mites.

Moisturisers (Emollients)

These are the most important part of the day-to-day treatment. Dry skin tends to “flare-up” into inflammation. This can often be prevented by keeping the skin supple and moist. This is hard work and tedious, but worthwhile. You can apply moisturisers as often as you need. This may be twice a day, or several times a day if your skin becomes very dry.

Water and soap tend to dry out the skin as they wash away the natural oils. Moisturisers work by replacing these body oils and keeping a layer of oil on the skin. There are many types of brands of moisturisers. They come as creams, ointments and bath/shower additives. Your GP, Practice Nurse or Pharmacist can advise. Some tips about moisturisers include:

- ❖ As a general rule, the more greasy and thick the moisturiser is, the better and longer it works, but the less pleasant they are to use.
- ❖ Apply generously to all areas of skin which tends to be affected.
- ❖ Not every product suits everybody. Many people try out a few to see which they prefer.

Many people with eczema use a range of different preparations. For example, a common routine would perhaps be the following:

- ❖ When you have a bath or shower, add moisturiser oil to the bathwater or as you shower. This will give your skin a general background “oiling”.