

Management of infantile eczema



Emma King, RN, is Dermatology Nurse Coordinator, The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, Victoria.

Eczema is a very common skin condition in children. Fortunately it can be easily managed and most children will grow out of it before the age of 5 years. Eczema causes the skin to become red, dry, and itchy; your child's sleep can be disturbed by the itch associated with eczema. The best way to manage and control the eczema is to:

- use preventive measures to keep eczema under control, and
- start treatment as soon as the flare begins.

The cause of eczema is not known, however the cause of flares are. The main reasons for eczema flares are:

- overheating
- dry skin
- rough, prickly materials and objects
- irritants such as saliva and chemicals, and
- allergies.

To avoid flares remove these aggravators from your child's environment.

Overheated skin

To avoid overheating, your child should be dressed in 1–2 thin layers of clothing only, most children with eczema should wear summer clothing throughout the year.

- Bed covers should be minimal: during summer one sheet, during winter one sheet and one cotton blanket
- Heaters cause children to overheat – the house should be kept cool, no hotter than 20°C, and no heaters in the bedroom.

Dry skin

Children with eczema have dry skin, and dry skin is itchy. To help this problem, moisturiser should be applied from 'top to toe' 3–5 times a day, even if the eczema is clear. Soap should not be used, use a bath oil in a cool bath twice a day instead. Moisturiser should be applied shortly after getting out of the bath.

Prickly skin

The skin is very sensitive and reactive to rough materials such as sand and wool. Children with eczema should wear soft, thin cotton materials.

Irritant skin

Saliva is the main irritant in childhood eczema. To avoid this irritation, apply regular applications of a thick moisturiser such as soft and liquid paraffin, especially before eating food.

Allergic skin

Food and environmental allergies can aggravate eczema. Do not remove foods from your child's diet without medical advice. If you think your child may be allergic discuss this with your doctor who may recommend allergy testing.

Infected eczema

Children with eczema are prone to their eczema becoming infected, especially if the eczema is not under control. Weeping or yellow crusts may indicate infected eczema. If you are concerned please see your doctor who may prescribe a course of antibiotics.

Treatments

Eczema treatments fall into two categories: daily treatments (applied every day even if the eczema is clear) and flaring treatments (applied at the FIRST sign of a flare, NOT when it gets 'really bad').

Daily treatments

- Moisturiser from 'top to toe', 2–3 times a day
- Bath oil added to the bath
- Avoid all the aggravators.

Flaring treatments

- Cortisone ointments as prescribed by your doctor

- Wet dressings and cool compresses if the eczema is not under control within 2 days of starting the cortisone ointments
- Oral antibiotics if there is skin infection.

Wet dressings

The best way to reduce the itch and control the eczema is to use a wet dressing. Wet dressings are easy to apply and are best used at night when your child is asleep.

How to apply a wet dressing

- apply cortisone ointment to the eczema if it is flaring
- apply moisturiser from 'top to toe'
- wet disposable (chux) towels in a bowl of tepid water and a capful of bath oil, and apply a few layers around the arms and legs
- hold the wet towels in place by wrapping a crepe bandage over the top.

Cool compresses

For immediate relief use a cool compress. To cool compress, wet a disposable towel (chux) in cool water and bath oil, and apply to the itchy area. Educate and encourage your child to use cool compress rather than scratching. Scratching is habit forming, makes the eczema worse and may lead to infected eczema.

General tips

- Treat the eczema with flaring treatments as soon as a flare begins.
- Keep your child cool, well moisturised and away from rough, prickly materials.
- Involve your child in his/her eczema care.
- Don't tell your child 'not to scratch', rather remind your child to cool compress to reduce the itch.
- Your child will not catch a cold from being underdressed or in wet dressings.
- If you notice infected eczema see your doctor.