

# Eczema

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*The term eczema refers to a number of different skin conditions in which the skin is red and irritated and occasionally results in small, fluid-filled bumps that become moist and ooze. The most common cause of eczema is **atopic dermatitis**, sometimes called **infantile eczema** although it occurs in infants and older children.*

*The word "atopic" describes conditions that occur when someone is overly sensitive to allergens in their environment such as pollens, molds, dust, animal dander, and certain foods. "Dermatitis" means that the skin is inflamed, or red and sore.*

*Kids who get eczema often have family members with hay fever, asthma, or other allergies. Some experts think these kids may be genetically predisposed to get eczema, which means characteristics have been passed on from parents through genes that make a child more likely to get it.*

*About half of the kids who get eczema will also someday develop hay fever or asthma themselves. Eczema is **not** an allergy itself, but allergies can trigger eczema. Some environmental factors (such as excessive heat or emotional stress) can also trigger the condition.*

*About 1 out of every 10 kids develops eczema. Typically, symptoms appear within the first few months of life, and almost always before a child turns 5. But the good news is that more than half of the kids who have eczema today will be over it by the time they're teenagers.*

## Signs and Symptoms

**Between 2 and 6 months of age.** Itchy, dry, red skin and small bumps on their cheeks, forehead, or scalp. The rash may spread to the extremities (the arms and legs) and the trunk, and red, crusted, or open lesions may appear on any area affected. They may also experience circular, slightly raised, itchy, and scaly rashes in the bends of the elbows, behind the knees, or on the backs of the wrists and ankles.

**Older Children.** As kids get older, the rash is usually less oozy and scaly than it was when the eczema first began, and the skin is extremely itchy and dry. These symptoms also tend to worsen and improve over time, with flare-ups occurring periodically.

## How Long Does It Last?

In many cases, eczema goes into remission and symptoms may disappear altogether for months or even years. For many kids, it begins to improve by the age of 5 or 6; others may experience flare-ups throughout adolescence and early adulthood. In some kids, the condition may improve and then resurface at the onset of puberty when hormones, stress, and irritating skin products or cosmetics are introduced (or due to other factors that scientists don't yet understand). And some people will experience some degree of dermatitis into adulthood, experiencing areas of itching and a dry, scaly appearance. Eczema is **not** contagious, so there's no need to keep a baby or child who has it away from siblings, other kids, or anyone else.

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## Helping your child with eczema

You can help prevent or treat eczema by keeping your child's skin from becoming dry or itchy and avoiding known triggers that cause flare-ups.

- **Avoid** giving your child frequent hot baths, which tend to dry the skin.
- Use warm water with **mild soaps or nonsoap cleansers** when bathing your child.
  - Suggested products: Cetaphil, Aveeno, Eucerin, Aquaphor, white Dove bar.
  - **Avoid** scented soaps
- **Avoid** excessive scrubbing and toweling after bathing your child. Instead, gently pat your child's skin dry.
- Apply an unscented lotions, cream, or ointment within a few minutes of bathing, on a daily basis. Sometimes you will need to moisturize twice a day.
  - Suggested products: Cetaphil, Aveeno, Eucerin, Aquaphor.
  - Even if your child is using a corticosteroid cream prescribed by the doctor, apply these products frequently, ideally two to three times a day.
- Use oatmeal soaking products in the bath to help control the itching.
- **Avoid** dressing your child in harsh or irritating clothing, such as wool or coarsely woven materials. Dress your child in soft clothes that "breathe," such as those made from cotton.
- Apply cool compresses (such as a wet, cool washcloth) on the irritated areas of skin to ease itching.
- Keep your child's fingernails short to minimize any skin damage caused by scratching.
- Try having your child wear comfortable, light gloves to bed if scratching at night is a problem.
- Help your child avoid becoming overheated, which can lead to flare-ups.
- Eliminate any known allergens such as certain foods, dust, or pet dander from your household. (This has been shown to help some young kids.)
- Have your child drink plenty of water, which adds moisture to the skin.

## Treatment

**Topical corticosteroids**, also called cortisone or steroid creams or ointments, are commonly used to treat eczema and are **not** the same as the steroids used by some athletes. These medicines are usually applied directly to the affected areas twice a day.

Continue to apply the corticosteroids for as long as the doctor suggests.

*It's also important not to use a topical steroid prescribed for someone else. These creams and ointments vary in strength, and using the wrong strength in sensitive areas can damage the skin, especially in infants.*

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## Prevention

Scientists believe that eczema is inherited, so there's no way to prevent it. However, because specific triggers can make it worse, flare-ups *can* be prevented or improved by avoiding possible triggers such as:

- Pollen, molds and dust
- Animal dander
- Dry winter air with little moisture
- Allowing the skin to become too dry
- Harsh soaps and detergents
- Certain fabrics: wool or coarsely woven materials
- Certain skin care products, perfumes, and colognes (particularly those that contain alcohol)
- Tobacco smoke
- Foods: depends on the person, but dairy products and acidic foods like tomatoes seem to be common culprits
- Emotional stress
- Excessive heat and sweating

Also, curbing the tendency to scratch the rash can prevent the condition from worsening and progressing to cause more severe skin damage or secondary infection.

## When to Call the Doctor

Children and teens with eczema are prone to skin infections, especially with staph bacteria and herpesvirus. Call your doctor immediately if you notice any of the early signs of skin infection, which may include:

- increased fever
- redness and warmth on or around affected areas
- pus-filled bumps on or around affected areas
- areas on the skin that look like cold sores or fever blisters

Also, call your doctor if you notice a sudden change or worsening of the eczema or if it isn't responding to the doctor's recommendations.

*Adapted from [www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org)*