

## **ATOPIC DERMATITIS (ATOPIC ECZEMA)**

Atopic dermatitis, also called atopic eczema or just eczema, is a stubborn, itchy rash, that occurs in certain persons with sensitive or irritable skin. Eczema is common in infants and young children and may disappear before adulthood. Eczema may clear for years, only to reappear later – often on the hands.

### **What causes Atopic Dermatitis?**

The cause of atopic dermatitis is not known. It's the results of a built-in defect of the skin that tends to run in families. Eczema is not contagious and is not related to your general health. Atopic dermatitis is also called "constitutional eczema"; this name emphasizes the built-in aspects of the condition. Persons with eczema have skin that is dry and easily irritated by soap, detergents, and rough woolen clothing. Very hot or very cold weather often aggravates eczema. Although certain allergies may worsen eczema, they do not cause it. Skin tests do not help, because eczema is not due to an allergy.

### **Treatment**

Because eczema patients have a constitutional skin defect, no permanent cure is possible. Fortunately, we have effective ways of controlling eczema; most persons are able to live comfortably with their skin handicap.

Cortisone compounds applied to the skin are the best medicine for controlling eczema. Most cortisone salves can be used safely for years. When large areas of the body are treated with strong cortisone salves, periodic medical checkups are necessary. Certain cortisones should not be applied to the face, armpits, groin, or rectal area. In patients with severe eczema, it's sometimes necessary to take cortisone by mouth; however, this is done only for short periods and under the close supervision of a clinician.

Cortisone is applied to the skin in the form of lotions, creams, or greasy ointments. When the skin is very dry, ointments are often best. Whatever preparation you use, be sure to use only a little and massage it in well. If you wish to have a more vigorous treatment, apply the medicine more often. Always remember to use just a little.

Other medicines are sometimes used. For stubborn eczema, salves containing coal tar can be helpful. Coal tar smells and stains clothes. You can minimize these nuisances by using it at bedtime.

In controlling your eczema, remember the following points:

- Keep your skin well lubricated. If your skin is too dry, use a greasy cortisone salve or apply a little white petrolatum (Vaseline) after your rub in your cortisone cream or lotion. Using a bath oil in the tub or applying mineral oil right after bathing will help keep your skin moist. The patient information sheet Dry Skin (Asteatosis, Xerosis) gives details on skin lubrication.
- Keep soap away from your eczema. Soap irritates and dries the skin. Persons with eczema should avoid it. When bathing or showering, use plain water; limit soap to your face, armpits, genital area, and feet. If you must wash your hands frequently with soap, rinse them carefully and afterward apply a little cortisone cream or ointment.
- Avoid overheating. Most persons with eczema find that hot weather and heavy sweating worsen their eczema. In hot weather, wear cool, loose clothing, and try to stay in air-conditioned buildings.
- Avoid direct skin contact with wool or similar rough clothing.
- Avoid anything that definitely aggravates your eczema. If certain creams, makeups, perfumes and so on cause itching or irritation, don't use them.
- It is usually possible to find a treatment routine that lets you control your eczema. Most treatments involve cortisone ointments or creams. When properly applied, these medications can be used safely for years.
- If your eczema worsens and you can't control it, please return so we can give you a different treatment.

**Test Results and Advice Nurse**

Please call the nurse for test results and advice: 863-4463

**Appointments**

Appointments can be made in person or by phone. If you are unable to keep your appointment, please call and cancel. Otherwise you will be charged for the visit.

To schedule or cancel appointments, call: 863-0774

For more information about health care issues, visit the UHS Web site at [www.sa.psu.edu/uhs](http://www.sa.psu.edu/uhs)

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

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