



Pharmaceutical
Society of Australia



Eczema and Dermatitis

Dermatitis means skin inflammation and generally involves a red, itchy skin rash. There are several different types of dermatitis, with different causes. The name 'eczema' is often used interchangeably with the name 'dermatitis', but sometimes 'eczema' refers specifically to a condition called 'atopic dermatitis'.

Signs and symptoms

Dermatitis may be an acute skin reaction which lasts for a few hours or days and it may also be a chronic skin condition that persists over a period of time. Signs and symptoms of dermatitis include:

- Itching
- Red, hot skin
- Dry, scaly skin
- Papules and blisters
- Weeping skin.

Chronic dermatitis may also cause:

- Rough, thick, leathery skin
- Painful cracks in the skin.

Some types of dermatitis

Contact dermatitis

Contact dermatitis is an irritation or allergic reaction caused by substances that have come in contact with the skin. The pattern and distribution of the rash can give a clue to the cause.

- Allergic contact dermatitis – common allergens include nickel (in jewelry), perfume, medicines, plants and rubber (latex).
- Irritant contact dermatitis – commonly caused by water, detergents, soaps, chemicals and friction. Housewives, nurses and hairdressers often get irritant dermatitis.

Atopic dermatitis/eczema

Atopic dermatitis/eczema is a chronic dermatitis that may be inherited and often occurs in people with a family history of eczema, asthma or hayfever. It usually begins in early childhood and often disappears by the teenage years. The areas of skin affected can vary with age, but it frequently affects

the face and creases of the elbows, wrists, knees and ankles. Many things can trigger a flare-up of eczema or make it worse, including emotional stress, allergies, changes in temperature or humidity, skin infections, and contact with irritating chemicals (e.g., soaps) and fabrics (e.g., wool, acrylic). Heat is a common trigger for eczema.

Treatment

The treatment of dermatitis includes identifying and eliminating the cause, moisturising dry skin, relieving the itch, suppressing the inflammation and treating and preventing skin infection.

Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice about dermatitis and its treatment.

Skin moisturisers

Moisturising the skin is very important. It helps relieve itch, prevent drying and cracking, and restore the skin's protective function. Frequent and liberal use of a moisturiser, especially after bathing, is recommended for treating and preventing dermatitis. Bath oil or emulsifying ointment can also be added to bath water. There is a wide range of moisturising products (including natural products) available. People with dermatitis are advised to avoid perfumed products.

Corticosteroids

Corticosteroids relieve skin inflammation and the symptoms of dermatitis. There is a range of corticosteroid creams, ointments and lotions available in different strengths and potencies. Hydrocortisone (mild potency) and clobetasone (moderate potency) are available from a pharmacist without a prescription, while more potent products must be prescribed by a doctor. Oral corticosteroids may be needed to control severe dermatitis.

Pimecrolimus

Pimecrolimus is a non-corticosteroid medicine that relieves skin inflammation and can relieve the symptoms of atopic dermatitis. Pimecrolimus cream must be prescribed by a doctor.

Astringents

Aluminium acetate (Burow's solution), potassium permanganate (Condy's crystals) and saline can help dry up a weeping dermatitis.

Antihistamines

Oral antihistamines, available from a pharmacist, can help relieve itching. Sedating antihistamines may be especially useful at night, but should not be given to children under 2 years unless prescribed by a doctor.

Tars

Tar preparations, available from a pharmacist, can relieve itch and inflammation.

Oral immunosuppressants

(e.g., azathioprine, cyclosporin)

Prescription medicines that suppress the immune system may be needed to control severe chronic dermatitis.

Self care

To protect your skin:

- Try to identify and avoid the cause of your dermatitis
- Avoid using soaps, which can be drying and irritant. Use a soap substitute. Ask a pharmacist
- Bathe or shower less frequently and for a shorter time. Use lukewarm rather than hot water
- Dry yourself carefully after bathing. Brush your skin rapidly with the palms of your hands, or gently pat your skin dry with a towel
- Avoid scratching. To relieve itching, pat the skin, cool the area or apply a moisturiser. Cover itchy skin with a dressing if necessary. Keep fingernails short and clean and wear gloves at night.

- Avoid overheating and dress to avoid excess sweating. In winter, avoid electric blankets and turn down heaters (central ducted heating is drying). In summer, use fans and air conditioners
- Wear soft, smooth, cotton clothing. Wool and some synthetic fabrics can be irritating and are best avoided
- Avoid cats, dogs and other animals if the dermatitis worsens on contact with them. Animal dander can cause both irritation and allergy
- Consult a doctor or dietician about food allergies and before an exclusion diet is commenced
- Learn and practice relaxation techniques to manage stress. Stress can trigger dermatitis.

Related fact cards

- *Relaxation techniques*
- *Shingles*
- *Tinea*

For more information

Eczema Association of Australasia Inc. – phone 1300 300 182 or website www.eczema.org.au

HEALTHInsite – website www.healthinsite.gov.au

New Zealand Dermatological Society Inc – website www.dermnetnz.org

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

NPS Medicines Line – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

The Poisons Information Centre – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

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