

Eczema

About eczema

- Atopic dermatitis, or eczema, is a common, recurring, non-infectious, inflammatory skin disease in which the skin becomes red, dry, itchy or scaly and may weep, bleed and crust over.
- Eczema belongs to the category of diseases called 'atopic', a term often used to describe allergic conditions for which there is a family history.
- The 'atopic triad' of allergies comprises eczema, asthma and hayfever, with many sufferers experiencing all three conditions.
- The word 'eczema' comes from the Greek word meaning "to boil over". It is the incessant itch of eczema that separates it from other skin diseases such as psoriasis.
- Eczema can spread over the entire body, but commonly affects the face, hands and creases of the elbows and knees.
- Triggers of eczema can include soaps, bubble baths and other toiletries, dust mites, pollens, grass, sand, animal dander, woollen and synthetic fabrics, chemicals, preservatives, fragrances, extreme changes in temperature, food and stress.
- A change of seasons can trigger an eczema 'flare up'. Research has shown more than half of people with eczema believe that their flares are worse in winter to early spring¹.

The common symptoms of eczema include:

- **Dry scales on the skin**
- **Inflammation – redness & swelling of the skin**
- **Intense itching (pruritus)**
- **Scratch marks**
- **Thick, dry, leathery skin**
- **Small, raised blister-like bumps that may open when scratched, which become infected, then weep and crust**



Prevalence

- Australia has one of the highest incidences of eczema world-wide. Eczema affects up to one in three children. The skin disease is most prevalent in children, with up to 90 per cent of cases developing symptoms by age five. However eczema can occur in people of any age².
- The prevalence of eczema has increased two-to-three fold in recent years³. Research shows the increase is linked to a range of environmental factors⁴.



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- Around 60 per cent of people with eczema will develop symptoms within in the first 12 months of life. While some of these people will outgrow symptoms, others will have the skin disease for life⁵.

Family history

- Although eczema is thought to be hereditary, around 30 per cent of people affected by the skin disease do not have a family history of allergic diseases⁴.
- A child with both parents who have an atopic condition, such as eczema, asthma or hayfever, has an 80 per cent chance of inheriting eczema⁴.

Management

- A person with eczema can spend up to \$2000 every year managing their disease¹.
- 40 per cent of people with eczema use four or more products to treat their eczema¹.
- Managing eczema to prevent flares is a constant battle involving daily moisturising with emollients, avoidance of allergens and irritants, dietary restrictions, using flare prevention products at the first signs of redness and itch, plus the application of topical steroid creams should a severe flare occur.
- The skin is the largest organ in the body. The regular use of moisturisers assists in reducing the rate of water loss through the skin and maintaining a protective barrier against infection.

Impact

- The relentless itching and scratching of eczema can lead to sleep disturbance, infections, days off work and school, social isolation and loss of self-esteem⁵.
- Eczema may also have a major impact on daily life. Those affected by eczema should avoid contact with triggers and allergens. Common activities that can cause discomfort to eczema sufferers or aggravate the condition include swimming, gardening and exercise.⁵

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For more information about eczema, please contact the Eczema Association of Australasia Inc on 1300 300 182 or visit www.eczema.org.au.

References

1. Department of Dermatology, St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne. Atopic Eczema Health Survey, January 1999 – February 2000, sample size 85.
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4. Lieberman, P & Anderson. *Allergic Diseases, Diagnosis and Treatment* 2nd Ed, Humana Press, New Jersey.
5. Su J et al. Atopic eczema: Its impact on the family and financial cost. *Arch Dis Child* 1997; 76:159-162.