

# 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. 'Dermatitis' is often also called 'eczema', but sometimes 'eczema' means a special type of dermatitis 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 continues over months or years. 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 area of the rash can give a clue to the cause.

- Allergic contact dermatitis – common allergens include nickel (in jewellery, coins), perfumes, medicines, plants and rubber (latex).
- Irritant contact dermatitis – commonly caused by water, detergents, soaps, chemicals and friction. Irritant dermatitis often occurs on a person's hands and is related to his/her job. For example cleaners, hairdressers,

mechanics and nurses often get irritant dermatitis. Nappy rash and rash caused by dribbling saliva are also forms of 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 hay fever. It usually begins in early childhood and has often disappeared by the teenage years. The areas of skin affected can vary with age, but it often affects the face, neck 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, dry skin and contact with irritating chemicals (e.g., soaps), sand, and rough fabrics (e.g., wool, nylon). Heat is a common trigger for eczema.

### **Treatment**

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

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

### **Skin moisturisers**

It is very important to moisturise skin. It helps relieve itch, prevent drying and cracking, and restore the skin's protective function. Plenty of moisturiser

applied at least twice a day, especially after bathing, can relieve and prevent dermatitis. Bath oil or oatmeal can also be added to bath water. There is a wide range of moisturising products (including natural products) available. People with dermatitis should not use 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 (e.g., prednisolone tablets) 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/eczema. 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 dermatitis that is weeping.

### **Antihistamines**

Oral antihistamines, available from a pharmacist, can help relieve itching. Sedating antihistamines may be

especially useful at night to help sleeping, 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 weaken 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 non-soap cleanser. Ask a pharmacist
- Bathe or shower less often 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 soft 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 getting too hot. Wear clothes that do not cause 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
- Rinse clothes well after washing, to remove detergent
- Wear protective gloves when using detergents or chemicals
- Avoid cats, dogs and other animals if your dermatitis gets worse 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 use relaxation techniques to manage stress. Stress can trigger dermatitis.

## For more information

### **Eczema Association of Australasia Inc**

Phone: 1300 300 182

Website: [www.eczema.org.au](http://www.eczema.org.au)

### **New Zealand Dermatological Society Inc**

Website: [www.dermnetnz.org](http://www.dermnetnz.org)

### **Healthdirect Australia**

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

### **Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)**

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

### **National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information**

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

### **The Poisons Information Centre**

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

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

## Related fact cards

- » *Dandruff (website only – ask your pharmacist)*
- » *Nappy Rash*
- » *Relaxation Techniques*
- » *Shingles*
- » *Tinea*

Your Self Care Pharmacy: