

# Eczema (Atopic Dermatitis)

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Eczema is an allergic skin problem that is very common. The condition is characterized by patches of dry, irritated, very itchy skin. In younger children these patches often involve the flexor creases of the arms and legs, as well as the neck and areas behind the ears. The rash can affect any area, however, including the scalp. Although this is an allergic disorder, the exact cause is typically unknown.

Eczema cannot be cured, but it is usually possible to manage the disease, and it often will become less bothersome with age and typically resolves as children approach school age. In certain patients, however, the disease can persist even into adulthood.

The basic components of eczema management include the following:

- The backbone of basic treatment is to re-hydrate the skin. Although short baths are sometimes recommended, when the skin is quite dry and irritated, the exact opposite is necessary. During flares of the problem, the patient should take soaking baths once or twice per day. The skin is fully saturated with water when the fingers and toes begin to "crinkle". After the soaking bath, a very light coat of prescription cream or ointment should be applied to the rough, dry areas followed typically by a moisturizing cream or ointment. These soaking baths are the mainstay of treatment.
- Only a very mild soap such as Dove, Aveeno, or Cetaphil should be used in the bath. A medicated shampoo such as Neutrogena T-Gel or Nizoral can be helpful for scalp problems.
- Antihistamines should be used to help control the itching. Oftentimes the dose of antihistamines required is much larger than those typically used for other allergic conditions.
- In children the fingernails should be closely clipped to decrease destructive scratching.
- In eczema that is difficult to manage despite aggressive skin care, antibiotics are sometimes required. Infected eczema is difficult to manage but is not different in appearance than normal eczema, so infection must be kept in mind if the problem does not respond to typical treatment.

These are the general recommendations for management, but more specific therapy may be necessary. Please speak with your doctor if you have any questions.