

Patient Information Leaflet: Atopic Dermatitis / Eczema

What is Atopic Dermatitis / Eczema?

Atopic dermatitis, also known as eczema, is a chronic inflammatory skin condition characterized by dry, itchy, and inflamed skin. It is most commonly seen in children but can occur at any age. It often begins in the first few months of life and a lot of children will grow out of their eczema between 5 and 10 years of age. Atopic dermatitis is part of a group of conditions known as atopic diseases, which also include asthma and allergic rhinitis or hayfever.

Causes and Triggers:

The exact cause of atopic dermatitis is not fully understood, but it is believed to result from a combination of genetic, environmental, and immune system factors. Common triggers include:

- **Genetics:** A family history of atopic diseases may increase the likelihood of developing atopic dermatitis.
- **Environmental Factors:** Exposure to allergens (like house dust mite, pollen or pet dander), irritants (such as soaps or detergents), and changes in weather and humidity (especially cold, dry air) can exacerbate symptoms.
- **Skin Barrier Dysfunction:** Individuals with atopic dermatitis may have a compromised skin barrier, leading to increased water loss and susceptibility to irritants and allergens penetrating through the defective barrier.
- **Infections:** Bacterial and viral infections can trigger flare-ups.

Symptoms:

Atopic dermatitis symptoms can vary from person to person but often include:

- Dry, sensitive skin
- Intense itching, often worse at night
- Red ill-defined patches, typically on the arms, legs, hands, eyelids, face, neck, and torso.
- Thickened, cracked skin
- Excoriations or scratch marks
- Small, raised bumps that may leak fluid if scratched

Diagnosis:

A dermatologist typically diagnoses atopic dermatitis through a physical examination and a review of the patient's medical history. Additional tests may be performed to rule out other skin conditions or to check for specific allergens.

Management and Treatment Options:

While there is no cure for atopic dermatitis, various treatments and strategies can help manage the condition and relieve symptoms.

1. **Moisturisers:**
 - Regular use of thick, fragrance-free moisturisers is essential to prevent dryness and maintain skin hydration. Apply moisturiser immediately after showering or bathing.
2. **Topical Corticosteroids:**
 - Anti-inflammatory creams or ointments that help reduce itching and inflammation during flare-ups. These should be used as directed by your consultant. They come in different strengths for different parts of the body and are used short term to control flares. They are not for continuous use as the stronger ones can cause skin

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thinning if used in the same area for prolonged period of times without a break (e.g. 3 months).

3. **Topical Calcineurin Inhibitors:**

- These are non-steroid anti-inflammatory creams, examples include tacrolimus and pimecrolimus, that help control inflammation and itching without the side effects associated with steroids. These can be used on a regular basis and may be used long term 2-3 times weekly to prevent flares. They can sometimes cause stinging particularly if applied to very inflamed skin or if you drink alcohol. It is therefore advisable to calm the skin first with a topical corticosteroid before gradually introducing these treatments. They can be very useful as part of long term control and prevention.

4. **Anti-histamines:**

- Oral anti-histamines may be recommended to help relieve itching and promote better sleep during flare-ups.

5. **Phototherapy:**

- Controlled exposure to ultraviolet light (UV) under medical supervision may help reduce symptoms for some patients.

6. **Systemic Treatments:**

- For moderate to severe cases that do not respond to other treatments, systemic medications (like corticosteroids or immunosuppressants) may be prescribed. Drugs used include Prednisolone, Ciclosporin, Azathioprine, Methotrexate and newer JAK inhibitor medications

7. **Biologic Therapies:**

- Newer treatments that target specific parts of the immune system (such as dupilumab) are available for moderate to severe atopic dermatitis.

Self-Care and Home Remedies:

- Take short lukewarm or tepid baths with added emollient bath oils for eczema or shower with soap substitutes applied to moist skin and then rinsed off.
- After washing apply a moisturiser to trap moisture into the skin.
- Wear soft, breathable clothing to avoid skin irritation.
- Identify and avoid personal triggers (allergens, irritating fabrics, stress).
- Keep fingernails short to reduce skin damage from scratching.

When to Seek Medical Advice:

- If you experience severe itching, redness, or inflammation that affects your daily life.
- If the skin becomes infected (increased redness, warmth, swelling, golden crust or weeping).
- If over-the-counter treatments are not providing relief.

Conclusion:

Atopic dermatitis is a common skin condition that can significantly impact quality of life. With a comprehensive management plan tailored to individual needs, many people can effectively control their symptoms and reduce flare-ups.

For any questions or concerns about atopic dermatitis or its treatment, please consult your dermatologist.

