

Atopic Dermatitis (Eczema)

Eczema is the most common skin condition, especially in children. It affects one in five infants but only around one in fifty adults. It is now thought to be due to "leakiness" of the skin barrier, which causes it to dry out and become prone to irritation and inflammation by many environmental factors. Also, some people with eczema have a food sensitivity which can make eczema symptoms worse. In about half of patients with severe atopic dermatitis, the disease is due to inheritance of a faulty gene in their skin called filaggrin. Unlike with urticaria (hives), the itch of eczema is not caused by histamine so anti-histamines do not control the symptoms. Eczema is often linked with **asthma, allergic rhinitis (hay fever) or food allergy**. This order of progression is called the atopic march.

Symptoms

Itchy, red or dry skin. It may "weep" or leak fluid that crusts over when scratched, which means that it is also infected. In infants, eczema often appears on the face. Children are prone to have the rash at the bends of the elbow joint, wrists, behind the knees and behind the ears. Adolescents and young adults typically have the rash in the same locations as children, as well as on the hands and feet. Patients with the faulty filaggrin gene often have hand eczema with excessive little lines on the skin of their palms.

Diagnosis

In many children, the exact cause of the eczema is not clear and treatment depends on regular use of moisturizer and topical medicines to dampen down the inflammation. One such treatment is topical steroids. In children where the skin is oozing, crusting and painful, an infection that needs treatment with antibiotics may be the primary trigger. Infants and young children with more severe eczema should be evaluated for food allergy. It's important to see an allergist / immunologist for diagnosis and management. It is often needed to receive input from a dietitian as well. Food allergies causing eczema are much less common in older children and adults. If you are suspected of having eczema that is caused by a food allergy, a confirmed diagnosis requires avoiding the trigger food for about four weeks with the help of a dietitian before doing a food challenge under your doctor's supervision to confirm that the food was actually causing the flare.

Adapted from: <http://www.aaaai.org/conditions-and-treatments/allergies/skin-allergy.aspx>

