

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Steven L. Smith, DC

A Natural Approach to Childhood Eczema

Rates of childhood eczema have risen dramatically in recent years. Today, atopic eczema is the most common skin disorder in youngsters, affecting 12 percent to 15 percent of school-age children (Br J Nurs 2006;15:494-9).

Unfortunately, this condition is both increasingly common and extremely uncomfortable. And the child isn't the only one who suffers; parenting a child with eczema also takes a toll.

In fact, one study out of Sweden, which looked at 78 children with mild to severe eczema, found that "childhood eczema affects the children's and their families' QoL [quality of life]." (Acta Derm Venereol 2007;87:345-9.)

Dr. Smith strives to help families manage this challenging condition — without resorting to drugs with potentially harmful side effects. Consequently, Dr. Smith encourages patients to focus on prevention and natural treatment options.



The Dangers of Eczema Drugs

Doctors of chiropractic, like Dr. Smith, focus on preventing disease, rather than treating symptoms with potentially dangerous drugs. They, therefore, urge patients to avoid the use of medication for eczema, including topical and oral steroids. The most common side effect from these drugs is thin and fragile skin. In addition, research links use of steroids with arthritic conditions and significantly lower immune function.

Dr. Smith is especially concerned about a new class of medications called topical immunosuppressant

calcineurin inhibitors. Marketed under the names Elidel® and Protopic, these drugs caused skin cancer and lymphoma in laboratory animals in recent studies. The FDA has stated that children under 2 should not use Elidel or Protopic and that "the effect of Elidel and Protopic on the developing immune system in infants and children is not known."

What Is Eczema?

It's important to note that eczema is *not* contagious.

The term eczema refers to a group of skin conditions in which the skin is red and irritated. Occasionally, small, fluid-filled bumps appear. The most frequent cause of eczema is atopic dermatitis (sometimes called "infantile eczema," although it occurs in both infants and older children).

Kids with eczema generally have family members who suffer from hay fever, asthma or other allergies. Therefore, scientists now believe eczema is hereditary.

What Are the Symptoms of Eczema?

Between 2 months and 6 months, children with eczema typically develop itchy, dry, red skin and small bumps on their cheeks, forehead, scalp or behind their ears. The rash may spread to the extremities and the trunk, and red, crusted or open lesions may appear. Kids with eczema may also experience circular, slightly raised, itchy and scaly rashes in the bends of the elbows, behind the knees or on the backs of the wrists and ankles.

Eczema is extremely itchy, and scratching can make the rash worse and lead to thickened, brownish areas on the skin.

Eczema can disappear for months or even years and flare up periodically.

It's key to obtain a professional diagnosis of eczema, as it may be confused with other skin disorders, such as psoriasis.

Prevention of Eczema

Prevention is key to keeping eczema at bay. Read on for some proven prevention tips for fending off eczema.

Keep skin hydrated

One of the most effective ways to keep eczema under control is to keep the skin hydrated. Lock in moisture with these simple steps:



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1. Bathe your child daily in luke-warm water. Do not use face-cloths or bubble baths.
2. Use mild, unscented soaps.
3. Pat your child dry — do not rub.

Use a thick, perfume-free emollient less than three minutes after getting out of the tub to create a seal or barrier and lock in the skin's moisture.

Avoid excessive sweating

Sweat can cause eczema flare-ups. Work to avoid situations that expose your youngster to overheating and excessive sweating.

Avoid harsh detergents

Don't use fabric softeners or laundry detergents with perfumes or dyes.

Avoid dust mites

Scientific studies reveal that dust mite droppings aggravate eczema. For example, a study in the journal *Lancet* concluded that "the activity of atopic dermatitis can be greatly reduced by effective HDM [house dust mite] avoidance." (*Lancet* 1996;347:15-8.) Dust mites thrive in warm, moist environments and tend to live in bedding, mattresses, curtains and carpets. To reduce dust mites in your child's room:

- ✓ Dust and vacuum regularly.
- ✓ Remove curtains and carpets.
- ✓ Keep stuffed animals to a minimum. Occasionally freeze stuffed animals (especially any that the child sleeps with) overnight to kill dust mites.
- ✓ Use allergy covers on pillows and mattresses.
- ✓ Wash bedding in hot water.

Avoid food triggers

For some eczema sufferers, a change in diet may bring relief. Food triggers vary from person to person, but dairy products and acidic foods like tomatoes are common culprits.

For instance, one study looked at 91 children with eczema. Eczema improved in 74 percent of the children after discontinuing cows' milk, eggs and various other foods. The research-

ers concluded: "A standard elimination diet avoiding cows' milk, egg, tomatoes and possibly colours and preservatives should help up to three-quarters of patients ... This diet may be considered in all children with moderate or severe eczema." (*QJ Med* 1991;80:677-93.)

When considering altering the diet of a baby or child, seek advice from a dietitian or nutritional therapist to ensure the child continues to receive adequate nutrients.

Avoid stress

Stress may provoke eczema flare-ups. Try to keep your child's anxiety level to a minimum. Teach your youngster stress-reduction techniques (such as breathing exercises or taking a break). Regular exercise and children's yoga classes may also be beneficial.

Seek chiropractic care

Although doctors of chiropractic do not treat skin conditions, regular chiropractic care may boost the body's overall well-being and immune function, in turn warding off disease.

Natural Approaches

When eczema does flare up, consider all-natural approaches, rather than potentially dangerous drugs. Read on for several suggestions.

Evening primrose oil

Several scientific studies demonstrate that evening primrose oil combats eczema symptoms. For instance, one analysis looked at "24 children with atopic eczema: 12 of them were treated [orally] with a higher dose of evening primrose oil than in previous studies and 12 with placebo olive oil ... After 4 weeks the eczema of essential fatty acid [evening primrose oil]-treated children significantly improved in comparison with that of placebo-treated children." (*Drugs Exp Clin Res* 1988;14:291.)

Lupin

The seeds of the lupin plant may quell eczema symptoms. "A double-blind clinical trial comparing a 10% ointment prepared from a 95% ethanol extract of *Lupinus termis* seeds with a 0.02% flumethasone pivalate ointment and a placebo showed that the *Lupinus*

termis extract was effective in the treatment of chronic eczema. The results obtained with the extract were statistically comparable to those obtained with the corticoid therapy." (*J Nat Prod* 1981;44:179-83.)

Licorice gel

Natural licorice gel can help ease eczema. For example, a study published in the *Journal of Dermatological Treatment* concluded that "licorice extract could be considered as an effective agent for treatment of atopic dermatitis." (*J Dermatolog Treat* 2003;14:153-7.) Note: Natural licorice is not the same as licorice candy.

Managing itching

Eczema is excruciatingly itchy. Unfortunately, scratching worsens the condition and can lead to a secondary infection. Try these tactics for easing the itch without harmful drugs:

- ✓ Use only cotton clothing and bedding: Synthetic fabrics and wool can irritate the skin. Disposable diapers may also aggravate the condition. When possible, opt for 100 percent cotton cloth diapers instead.
- ✓ Keep nails short: Minimize skin damage if your child scratches.
- ✓ Have your child wear mittens at night: Wearing light cotton gloves or mittens to bed can minimize damage from nighttime scratching.
- ✓ Apply cool compresses: A wet, cool washcloth can ease itching.
- ✓ Try oatmeal: Natural bath products containing oatmeal may ease itching.

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