

Brush Up On Your Eczema Basics!

A general overview of eczema for sufferers and carers for all ages



Successful eczema management starts with understanding what eczema is. Your dermatologist (skin specialist), GP, nurse or other diagnosing health professional should have explained what kind of eczema you may have or are treating. Always follow their advice and seek further medical help if the eczema changes in appearance in any way.

Moisturise, moisturise, moisturise!

People who suffer with eczema tend to lose moisture from their skin barrier and one of the most important elements in managing eczema is to keep the skin soft and supple by frequent and liberal use of topical emollients, commonly known as moisturisers.

- All emollient creams, ointments, lotions, bath oils and soap substitutes should be targeted for hypoallergenic, sensitive or eczema prone skins and should be used regularly. These options are widely available for purchase from pharmacies, department stores, grocery outlets and various online stores.
- What suits one person's skin may not suit another, so do experiment with different products to find which sensitive emollients work best for your skin.
- Always aim to apply emollients multiple times a day, but after bathing is especially helpful as this will trap the maximum amount of moisture in the skin.
- Emollients can come in many forms, including ointments, creams, lotions, sprays and mousse. Ointments are thicker therefore can be better for dry skins, however they can be very greasy and therefore not be suitable for daytime use especially in warmer climates. For example, many sufferers use a cream by day and then an ointment at night.
- When bathing or showering it is essential to add a bath oil or a moisturising wash to the water. Water temperature should be tepid to warm rather than too hot, with showers not too long in duration. After bathing always pat the skin dry with a dry cotton bath towel rather than rubbing.
- Consider changing your shampoo, conditioner and shaving products when bathing to sensitive, fragrance free and/or moisture boosting alternatives, as these products often also run down our bodies during our bathing routines.
- Always patch test new products prior to applying it liberally on an area of the face or body.

Topical steroids

'Topical' means something that is applied to the skin. Topical steroids reduce inflammation and can be very effective in controlling flare-ups as they make the skin less itchy and sore, giving it a chance to heal. Topical steroids are a very safe and effective treatment if used correctly. Following emollients, they are the most common form of treatment prescribed.

- Topical steroids come in ointments, creams or lotion, and in four different strengths. Lotions and gels are the easiest to apply on hairy areas of the body.
- In deciding which type of topical steroid to prescribe for your skin, the treating physician will consider the persons age, severity of eczema, site of eczema and other current treatments and/or medical conditions.
- Make sure you are given clear guidance about how to use your topical steroids, including the quantity required to apply to the affected area/s and the correct way to apply them. Dermatology or community nurses are often able to give this sort of advice.
- There are two types of hydrocortisone topical steroids that can be bought from the pharmacy without a prescription: 0.5% (a mildly potent preparation) and 1.0% (moderately potent). Pharmacists can sell these to treat mild eczema as well as allergic and irritant contact dermatitis – ask your pharmacist for advice.
- You should always continue to use your emollients, even whilst using topical steroids.

Itching and scratching

Eczema can be unbearably itchy – itch triggers scratching, which in turn hinders healing and increases the itch. For most of us, scratching is an automatic response; we do it without really thinking about it. One way to stop this is to use a technique called “habit reversal.” There are several methods of becoming aware of scratching episodes and breaking the habit:

- If you tend to scratch while you watch TV, arm yourself with a stress-relief ball keeping your hands busy.
- Gently press on itchy areas, rather than scratch.
- Apply something cold such as ice cubes or frozen peas, wrapped in a dry cloth.
- Keep some emollient creams in the fridge (not ointments as they become too hard), these can then give a cooling sensation when applied.
- Rather than saying ‘stop scratching’ at someone, suggest something else to distract their attention from their scratching.
- Using antihistamines to reduce the itching and skin reaction, which can in turn help to break the ‘itch scratch cycle’.
- Try and relax when possible ... take time for yourself by doing something you enjoy. An oily bath with candles and your favourite music is always good!

Lifestyle & Diet

Have you looked at the environmental or other factors recently that may be triggering or aggravating the eczema? Aspects of the home, school or work environment may all be having an effect.

- Try to keep yourself and your skin at a cool, even temperature.
- Drink plenty of water, keeping hydrated can help balance your skins moisture levels.
- Everything food and drink related should be in moderation, so when considering significant dietary changes, it is advised to first always seek advice from a registered dietitian or nutritionist.
- Tobacco, alcohol and illicit drug use can all affect eczema.
- Wearing light cotton layers of clothing where possible. Overheating from fabrics can cause heating and irritation.
- Laundry detergents should ideally be changed to ‘sensitive’ branded options to avoid irritations from added enzymes and reactions transferred by clothes and manchester to the skins surface. Adding laundry sanitiser to loads of washing can also reduce bacteria in the wash cycle.
- Avoid contact with substances that may irritate or trigger a skin reaction, such as nickel and some household chemicals.
- Vacuum regularly and wipe down hard surfaces to cut down on home and workplace dust.
- Pets don’t cause eczema directly. However, pet dander or flakes of dead skin cells are a common trigger for some eczema sufferers and related conditions, like asthma. Proteins found in pet saliva can set off eczema symptoms. So, if you have pets, want a pet or just love animals, always practise good hand hygiene and keep the spaces your pets occupy as clean as possible.

Moderate to severe eczema

The effectiveness of emollients and topical steroid treatment in chronic atopic eczema can be dependent on many factors including the effective elimination of self-damaging scratching and rubbing behavior. However, there are many other treatments and management options available for these eczema sufferers which can be best assessed by your treating dermatologist. These may include but are not limited to; bleach baths, wet wrapping, phototherapy, allergen testing, skin biopsies, oral steroids & antibiotics, immunosuppressants, biologics and psychological counseling.

To find a Dermatologist in your area visit: <https://www.nzdsi.org/Dermatologist-Map.aspx>

A GP referral may be required to see a Dermatologist.

Ask for help!

1. Always talk to your treating medical and health care professionals about your concerns.
2. Contact the **EANZ** on **0800 300 182** or email us at help@eczema.org.nz Family memberships are available and include ongoing eczema news, treatment updates, support information and eczema management resources.

Taking a positive and open-minded approach to managing your own or a loved one’s eczema is not easy – however never be afraid to ask for help when you need it, you are not alone. We are here to help!