



ATOPIC DERMATITIS

DEFINITION

Atopic dermatitis or eczema is a chronic, inherited disorder of the skin, usually beginning in early childhood and often associated with a personal or family history of asthma or hay fever. The primary skin abnormality arises from an increased tendency toward itching, irritation, and dryness. It is not an allergy and thus cannot be cured or avoided. Even with the best skin care, periodic flare ups occur. Over a period of years, however, the skin usually improves and tends to be less sensitive. In general, it is best to remember that the skin of patients with atopic dermatitis is “different.” It will become itchy and irritated by material or situations that normally do not bother others. Here are some important points to help control this common skin problem:

- 1. Avoid irritating the skin with external substances.** Do not apply anything to the skin that is not prescribed by your doctor. Rubbing alcohol, certain over-the-counter treatments, and home remedies often make the skin worse. Wool, synthetic fibers, and rough clothing will also make the skin more itchy and irritated. 100% cotton fabrics are tolerated best.
- 2. Avoid excessive soap and hot water.** Harsh soaps and hot baths or showers will dry the skin, making it more irritated. Mild soaps like Dove or Basis are best, but should be used sparingly over acutely inflamed, itchy skin. You need not limit the amount of showers or baths per week, but should keep them short and always apply a moisturizer to damp skin immediately after bathing. After a shower or bath, skin should be gently patted dry, not rubbed. Creams like Eucerin, Cetaphil, CeraVe, and Aveeno will keep the skin moist, decrease itching, and promote healing.
- 3. Prescription medications are necessary during flares.** Anti-inflammatory creams/ointments (steroids, Protopic, Elidel) should be rubbed gently onto rashes twice daily or as directed by your dermatologist. A moisturizer should be applied to both rashes and normal skin to keep skin supple and prevent flares.
- 4. Antibiotics may be necessary.** During acute flares or when prolonged scratching has produced breaks in the skin, crusting, oozing, and infection may occur. Antibiotics are administered to eliminate infection and shut down an acute flare. To be effective, antibiotics must be taken exactly as directed.
- 5. Antihistamines (anti-itch medications) can help control itching.** They may cause drowsiness in some patients and should not be taken before driving or operating heavy machinery. If you scratch at bedtime and cannot sleep due to itch, antihistamines are useful when taken one hour before bedtime. If scratching cannot be controlled, the fingernails should be clipped short to decrease damage to the skin.
- 6. Avoid direct contact with people with cold sores (fever blisters).** Herpes simplex virus can produce severe complications in patients with atopic dermatitis.
- 7. Atopic dermatitis is a chronic condition.** This skin disease may last for years. In order to keep skin healthy and prevent flare-ups, you must get into the habit of protecting and treating the skin every day.

