

What can make eczema worse?

My symptoms of eczema seems to be much worse now as soon as I get home from work. As soon as I get in, I start scratching for no reason, and it gets worse over the evening and in my sleep. Why is this happening?

The pattern of scratching and irritation you describe could arise for a number of reasons. First, consider your home environment: for example, do you keep your home very warm? The use of central heating can create a dry atmosphere; this plus the heat can act as a trigger to irritation in eczema so it is best to keep your home cool if possible. This might not be tolerated quite as well by others you share the house with, but it will be helpful in reducing your irritation. Also consider whether other factors at home – for example, animal dander or cigarette smoke – could be causing the exacerbation. Your home differs from the environment at work as it comprises more carpeting, curtains and soft furnishings, all of which are a potential haven for house dust mites. Measures to reduce house dust mites (as described in Chapter 4) might help your eczema so might be worth trying for a couple of months to see whether they have an effect.

Just being relaxed at home could be part of the problem too as you are probably busy and distracted at work – so although you might get the itchy sensation, you might not have the opportunity to scratch. Once at home, you might feel more ‘free’ to scratch, and there are fewer distractions to blur the itch sensation. This can progress to the point at which you might have developed a habit of scratching as soon as you get home. Once an itch–scratch cycle is established, it can become habitual. If you feel that this could be a possibility, you may find the advice at the end of Chapter 4 helpful.

Since I have developed eczema, I have been told not to use soap, but I don't really feel clean unless I have used soap. Can you suggest one that I can use?

Soaps have an alkaline base and as such have a drying, irritant effect on the skin. When we use a soap to cleanse the skin, it removes not only the dirt, but also the protective grease produced by the skin to maintain the barrier function. We only have to look at the hands of people who do a lot of washing-up and cleaning to see how irritant soap can be so it should be avoided by anyone with eczema. By soap, we mean anything that creates lather or bubbles so bubble bath and shower gel should also be avoided. A soap substitute, such as aqueous cream or emulsifying ointment, should be used instead; this will still have an effective cleansing effect on your skin. There are also some more expensive soap-free lotions that you might find easier to use – they even come in containers like shower gel. If you are set on using soap, try to limit it to specific areas such as your armpits and choose a pH-neutral variety that is non-perfumed and has added moisturising creams.

Can you give me some advice about diet and eczema?

A number of research studies have examined the role of diet in atopic eczema so this answer really only applies if you have this type. These studies have looked at exclusion of dairy products, chicken, wheat, flavourings and additives. Some studies seem to indicate a link, but many of the newer studies do not show any relationship. You have to remember that all studies of eczema are difficult, for three reasons:

- First, eczema fluctuates in severity, regardless of any treatment given.
- Second, eczema spontaneously resolves in most children as they get older.
- Finally, it is difficult to accurately quantify or score the severity of eczema.

Studies have to take all these factors into account and ideally

use a placebo group who receive no active treatment. The placebo group is important because one must know how many people would improve even though they are not getting any of the specific treatments being assessed in the trial.

This all seems rather confusing, but the most recent studies have been well conducted and have used placebo groups. They have looked mainly at dairy-free diets and very severe exclusion diets, such as elemental diets in which only a few types of food are allowed. The results have shown that dietary changes do not usually cause an improvement in eczema after the age of 1 year. There was a possible benefit from a dairy-free diet in children under 1 year old, but the effect was so small that, statistically, this might have occurred by chance. All studies have revealed that it is difficult for families to stick to special diets, especially when children go to school, parties, etc. We do not routinely advise dietary manipulation as a way of treating eczema. If you are convinced that one food or a group of related foods is important in making your eczema worse, you should only try and change your diet with the help of a dietitian.

Would you ever use a diet?

Yes, we would occasionally consider a dairy-free diet in a child less than 1 year old if other conventional treatments were not working well. In addition, if there were a clear-cut history of a certain food making the eczema worse every time it was consumed, we would consider a 3-month exclusion trial.

To ensure that adequate nutrition is provided, a dietitian should supervise any dietary approach. A dietitian can also give invaluable advice on which foods to use and where to obtain them. Do not try to follow diets listed in magazines or shown on the television as there is the potential to develop a regime that does not completely exclude all the relevant food, and there is also a risk of undernourishing the child.

At the end of the 3-month exclusion, the food thought to be at fault should be reintroduced. If the eczema does not come back, it may be that it was only a temporary problem or that the food was not making the eczema worse. If the eczema returns, the

exclusion diet should be restarted as the final 'proof' needs to come from demonstrating that the exclusion works a second time. Even in this case, the problem rarely persists for more than a year or so.

We wish that diet were more important in eczema as it would provide an easy and safe approach to therapy. Our general experience has, however, shown that diets are extremely hard work and are often disappointing in terms of any impact they have on eczema.

I have eczema and am very allergic to peanuts. Are these two conditions related?

No, they are probably not directly related. Nuts, especially peanuts, are well known for causing a severe allergic reaction, called anaphylaxis, characterised by swelling of the lips and face, vomiting, difficulty breathing, a widespread nettle rash and even collapse. The incidence of this appears to be increasing, and the allergy is lifelong, unlike many other childhood food intolerances.

There is a growing feeling that children, especially those with an 'atopic tendency', should avoid eating peanuts, and to a lesser extent other nuts, until late childhood. This may prevent nut allergy developing but has nothing to do with the causes of eczema. You should make sure that you carry a card or wear a bracelet to let anyone know that you have this problem in case you are so badly affected that you cannot speak.

Should I remove foods containing colourings and additives from my daughter's diet?

Unless there is a very strong link with her eczema, i.e. every time these foods are consumed the eczema becomes worse, we do not think that this is necessary. Colourings and additives may be important with some children with another disorder called urticaria or hives, but the link with eczema is very tenuous. In practice, they are extremely difficult to avoid as they seem to be added to so many foods favoured by children. It may be helpful to discuss this further with a dietitian before embarking on such an exclusion diet.

Is there anything else we can do to stop the eczema getting worse?

Apart from following the advice in the chapter on treatment, there are some general measures that can be of benefit. As with other bits of general advice in this book, the measures may apply much more to people with an atopic type of eczema:

- Avoid any pets with furry or hairy coats, such as rabbits, hamsters, cats, dogs and horses. We don't advise getting rid of existing pets, but you might want to consider not replacing them when they die.
- Clothes and bedding should be of cotton or even silk as these are less irritant than wool and synthetic materials.
- Keep fingernails cut short, and consider wearing cotton gloves or mittens at night.
- Try to use a non-biological washing powder and rinse clothes thoroughly after washing to remove traces of soap powder. It might be useful to use an extra rinse cycle on the washing machine.
- Pollen can sometimes make eczema worse. Adult eczema sufferers can ask a relative or friend to cut the grass; if your child is affected, cut the grass in the evening after he or she has gone to bed.
- Wear cotton gloves when doing housework such as vacuuming, polishing or dusting, keep the room well ventilated, and if your child has eczema, ask him or her to stay out of the room you are cleaning.
- Keep cool; sweat can irritate the skin, leading to intensely itchy, dry, eczematous skin.
- Avoid handling or preparing irritant foods such as citrus fruits, onions, chillies, raw vegetables (especially tomatoes) and salty food.
- Cigarette smoke can be an irritant to eczema so encourage smokers to keep their habit outside the home.

I have been recently advised that my daughter's eczema is aggravated by teething, smoke and cat or dog hair. She is 18 months old. Could you please advise on such claims – she hasn't had any tests?

It depends a bit on who is giving you this advice and whether it is general or specific. Teething has been reported as causing flares of eczema on the face in young children, but this could be related to the increased dribbling causing irritation around the mouth rather than to any direct effect of teething. Smoke is irritant to the skin so this is good advice – try to make sure that your daughter is not exposed to any smoke.

Cat and dog hair can be a problem, and this is usually a direct allergic effect so could show up on a blood test. It is very unfair to make young children have blood tests as you may already have a feeling that the family pet is causing a problem. It is interesting that it is not cat hair itself that causes the problem but something in the cat's saliva, which coats the hairs after all the washing that cats do. With dogs, the allergen is in the hair itself. Try to keep the pet out of your daughter's bedroom, and keep a play mat handy to put down on carpets that may have pet hair on them.