

Eczema

Eczema (sometimes called atopic eczema or dermatitis) is a non-contagious dry skin condition. Symptoms can vary greatly from sufferer to sufferer, and can range from **dry patches, scaly skin and itching**, to **weeping sores, bleeding and crusting**. There is no cure for eczema, but the condition can be managed.

It is thought **one in 12 adults** has eczema to some degree in the UK. It is more prevalent amongst families with a history of asthma, eczema and hayfever (or the atopic triad), and it is more common in Asian, black African and black Caribbean families.

Statistics suggest that 15% of the population will visit their GP each year with a problem skin condition, and eczema is the most prevalent of these conditions.

Eczema Symptoms

The most common symptom of eczema is skin dryness. You may have general dry skin all the time, but you may also experience flare ups when the skin is particularly dry, cracked, sore or angry.

Alongside skin dryness, eczema can often make the skin **incessantly itchy**. This itching can **disrupt your sleep, affect your concentration** and cause great **discomfort** and **irritation**.

Scratching the skin can cause damage, and make your skin bleed, which leads to further inflammation and itching and lead to the **itch-scratch cycle** which can be hard to break.

Eczema may also cause a range of other symptoms, such as:

- Cracked skin and rough skin
- Tiny blisters or weeping skin
- A rash, or red, sore skin
- Scaly patches or a thickening/darkening of the skin
- Areas of swelling and your skin may feel hot
- Infection with bacteria such as staphylococcus aureus

Eczema can be experienced anywhere on the face and body, but in adults it tends to be found on the hands and around joints on the arms and legs, such as the back of the knee or the inside of the elbow.

Eczema Causes & Triggers

The causes of eczema are not fully understood, but genetics certainly seems to play a part. **Eczema, asthma and hay fever are hereditary**, and if one or both of your parents suffered these conditions, you are more likely to experience them too.

Eczema symptoms worsen when the skin comes into contact with **irritating substances or allergic triggers**, such as **pet hair or dander, dust mites, certain fabrics, laundry detergents, traditional soaps** and even water.

Extremes of weather can affect your eczema, and your symptoms are likely to be **worse in winter**, when it is **cold outside** and central heating makes indoor air dry. Warm weather makes us perspire more which can aggravate eczema, and sunlight may also cause photosensitivity.

Diet can be an important factor for the health of your skin overall, and certain foods are thought to be more likely to cause skin reactions than others. Typical foods associated with eczema flare ups are:

- Dairy products
- Eggs
- Nuts and seeds
- Soy products
- Wheat
- Fruits
- Cow's milk
- Fish

Many eczema sufferers find their **symptoms are worse** when they are **stressed**. It is not fully understood why, but it is thought to be linked to the **release of stress hormones**. Stress is a common part of life, and at times it can be difficult to reduce.

Tension, fatigue, illness and tiredness can all lower your defenses and impact your body's immune system leaving it vulnerable to an eczema flare-up.

Synthetic fabrics can irritate your skin, so opt for natural cottons when you can. **Avoid wool and cashmere** as much as possible, as the short course hairs can scratch and agitate your skin.

It is believed that up to 1 in 5 of us have an **allergy to dust mites**, which can exacerbate eczema symptoms. Dust mites thrive in warm, humid conditions, living in mattresses, carpets and soft furnishings, so vacuum well regularly and wash linens and bedding at 60 degrees.

Some occupations or hobbies can be troublesome for some eczema sufferers when they involve continual contact with chemicals and irritants or involve a lot of hand-washing, for example nursing, hairdressing and catering.

Types of Eczema

Contact eczema

Often experienced on the hands, contact eczema, as the name suggests, occurs when an irritant comes into contact with the body causing a reaction and flare-up of symptoms. Sometimes referred to as “occupational dermatitis”, irritants can often be found in the place of work or around the house and include things like chemicals, pet hair, dust, solvents, cleaning products and detergents.

Atopic eczema

Linked with the Atopic Triad (asthma, eczema and hayfever), Atopic Eczema occurs when the genes of the sufferer are altered slightly so that their body’s immune system “overreacts” to allergens, such as environmental pollution, pollen, dust, chemicals and pet hair.

Discoid Eczema

With distinctive circular patches of eczema usually found on the arms or legs of adults, discoid eczema may be initially be confused with ringworm. In time, the skin often becomes very itchy and can ooze and become infected. Episodes of discoid eczema usually clear up on their own, drying to become scaly, flaky patches of skin.

Varicose Eczema

Common in older people or those with limited mobility, varicose eczema (or gravitational eczema) is usually found in the lower leg around varicose veins, areas affected by thrombosis, phlebitis or poor circulation. The skin can become very dry and infected and eczema can develop.

Seborrheic Eczema

Found on the scalp and around the eyebrows, nose and mouth, seborrheic eczema in adults ([link to seborrheic dermatitis page](#)) often starts as dandruff-like flakes of skin which can become inflamed, infected, sore and itchy. In children, the condition is often referred to as cradle cap.

Pompholyx Eczema

Characterised by watery blisters, this condition is usually confined to the hands and feet, and mostly affects young adults. The blisters can become inflamed, infected and the skin can feel like its “burning”.

Eczema Treatments

GP prescribed or “over-the-counter” medicines for eczema often include steroids, emollients or antibiotics. These treatments can be harsh on sensitive skin, and steroids can even cause thinning and discolouration if used over a long period, so you may like to look for natural alternatives.



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