

Atopic Dermatitis (Eczema)

Atopic dermatitis is a common condition. If your child has it, they may get dry red skin. It looks like a rash and itches.

What is it?

If your child has atopic dermatitis, they may get red, dry, scaling, itching skin. If your child is younger, the rash may show up on the face, legs, feet, hands and arms. As they become older, the rash may show up on the bends of the elbows, knees, hands, feet, neck and face.

It itches badly, and many patients, especially children, scratch or rub themselves until they bleed. They may have a hard time sleeping.

Over time, the dry itchy skin may get thick and leathery. It may sometimes become a darker color.

What causes it?

Nobody knows exactly what causes atopic dermatitis. In most cases, providers cannot find a specific cause.

For many children, other people in the family have it, or there is a family history of allergic conditions in general, like asthma or hay fever. It does not happen very often, but sometimes atopic dermatitis in infants may be related to food allergy, such as sensitivity to milk or eggs. But this can be hard to test.

Things that can make it worse

Many things may affect how serious the condition is. All children with atopic dermatitis have sensitive and dry skin. During the winter, dryness and itchiness may be worse for some children because of the low humidity. For other children, there are more problems during the summer because sweat can make it worse. Sudden changes in temperature cause more itching for most children.

Because children with atopic dermatitis have sensitive skin, it is important to avoid using harsh soaps and detergents. Your child should also avoid wearing wool against the skin.

Is it infectious or contagious?

No. You cannot catch it from someone or give it to someone else by touching them. But if your child has atopic dermatitis, it can become infected easily. This is called “secondary infection.” Bacterial secondary infection is the most common, usually because of scratching. If this happens, your doctor may prescribe an antibiotic.

Some kinds of viruses can cause a more serious problem. The “cold sore” virus, also called herpes simplex, is one of these. If you think this has happened to your child, call your child’s healthcare team right away.

To Learn More

- Dermatology
206-987-2158
- Ask your child’s healthcare provider
- seattlechildrens.org

Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line, 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.

Is there a cure for atopic dermatitis?

No, but there are many different treatments. Sometimes it can be very difficult and frustrating to treat and takes a lot of time and energy. The main goals of treatment are to improve the skin rashes and to make it itch less.

We may not be able to make the rash go away completely. Most people will have good weeks and bad weeks. Many children with atopic dermatitis outgrow the condition before school age. But some may keep having problems with it as an adolescent or even as an adult.

How is atopic dermatitis treated?

- **Use moisturizer on your child's skin.** Because the skin is dry, it is important to use mild ointments or creams as often as possible. Thicker moisturizers like ointments and creams usually work better than lotions or products that can be pumped or poured. Moisturizers that work well are Vaseline or petroleum jelly, Aquaphor, Cetaphil cream, Vanicream, or CeraVe cream. Check with your child's healthcare provider first before giving any type of ointment to your child.
- **Your child's doctor may prescribe steroid ointment or cream (cortisone).** This can help with itching, redness and swelling. Your child's doctor will prescribe cortisone treatment depending on where the rash is and how serious it is. Cortisone treatment is safe if it is not used too much. It can cause problems if it is overused, so it is very important to follow the instructions that your child's healthcare team gives to you.
- **Avoid having your child bathe in very hot or very cold water.** It is OK for your child to bathe daily, but it is best to use lukewarm water. Use a mild soap (like fragrance-free Dove or Cetaphil gentle cleansing lotion). Only use soap where it is needed and avoid bubble baths. Pat the skin dry, and always use moisturizers right away after a bath or shower.
- **Avoid having your child come into contact with things that you know cause itching.** These may include soaps, detergents, certain perfumes, Febreze, dust, grass weeds, wools and other types of scratchy clothing.
- **Have your child try to avoid scratching their skin.** Scratching makes the rash worse. It is important to keep your child's fingernails short. Sometime oral medicines called antihistamines, like diphenhydramine (Benadryl) or hydroxyzine (Atarax), can help with itching at night. Sometimes, these medicines can make young children hyper. Check with your child's healthcare provider first before giving any type of antihistamine to your child.
- **Prevent infections.** Sometimes, your child's doctor will recommend adding dilute bleach to your child's bath to help prevent infection (see the Seattle Children's handout called Dilute Bleach Baths). If your child's atopic dermatitis becomes infected, your child's healthcare team may prescribe antibiotics.

- **If the rash is very bad, try wet wraps or wet pajama therapy to help with itching and dryness.** Have your child soak in a tub of lukewarm water for 10 minutes. Rub on medicines or moisturizer right away. Dip some cotton pajamas in lukewarm water and put them over your child's wet greasy skin. Wrap your child in a blanket or a layer of dry clothes to help them stay warm. Your child may need to keep it on overnight, or for 1 to 2 hours. We will give you directions specific to your child on how long and often you to do this. To learn more about wet wraps, read our handout "Wet Wrap Therapy" seattlechildrens.org/pdf/PE1911.pdf.
- **Try to keep the temperature and humidity in the home fairly constant.** You may need an air conditioner in the summer and humidifier in the winter. It is very important that the humidifier be cleaned well and often to keep mold from growing.