

Eczema

Eczema is a term used to describe a group of inflamed skin conditions that result in chronic, relapsing and very itchy rashes. About 15 million people in the United States suffer from some form of eczema, including 10 to 20 percent of all infants. There is no known cause for the condition, but it appears to involve an overactive immune system in the presence of certain materials and often occurs in people susceptible to allergies.

Symptoms vary from person to person but often include dry, red, itchy patches on the skin which, when scratched, tend to break out in rashes. Objects and conditions that trigger itchy eczema outbreaks may include rough or coarse materials touching the skin, excessive heat or sweating, soaps, detergents, disinfectants, fruit and meat juices, dust mites, animal saliva and danders, upper respiratory infections and stress. Avoidance of those triggers is the simplest way to minimize flare-ups.

The first and most critical step in preventing eczema is to restrain yourself from scratching. Moisturizing lotions or creams, cold compresses and nonprescription anti-inflammatory corticosteroid creams and ointments are often helpful. Beyond this, physicians may prescribe corticosteroid medication, antibiotics to combat infection or sedative antihistamines. Phototherapy is a common procedure to reduce rashes, as are tar treatments (though messy). For severe cases, drugs such as cyclosporine A may be recommended. The FDA is currently studying a new class of drugs called topical immunomodulators (TIMs) for the modulation of immune response to reduce eczema flare-ups.