

# What Is Eczema ?

## What is eczema?

Eczema (atopic dermatitis) is a chronic, recurring inflammatory skin disease. The skin becomes extremely itchy, red or scaly. Eczema can appear on many parts of the body, depending on age. Eczema doesn't spread from person to person. Instead, it tends to run in families. It is found most commonly in children under 2 years old in Hong Kong.

## What are the signs and symptoms of eczema?

- The affected skin becomes very dry and itchy.
- The skin also becomes red, scaly. It can become thick and leathery.
- In severe cases, the skin can weep, and bleed when scratched.

## Which areas of the body will be affected by eczema?

The areas of the body that eczema tends to affect vary with age:

- In babies, a patchy rash usually appears on the face, elbows, and knees.
- In older children, the rash tends to appear more behind the knees, inside the elbows, on the sides of the neck, and on the wrists, ankles, and hands.
- In adults, the rash is most common on the arms, legs, hands, and neck, but it may appear anywhere.

## Impacts of eczema on patients and their family members

The impacts of eczema on patients and their family members are not negligible. Eczema affects patients' mood, quality of sleep, performance at work and at school. Eczema also brings psychological and financial burdens to the family.

**Impacts of eczema on children:** Eczema in children led to distress, anxiety, embarrassment, poor self-esteem, and lack of self-confidence. The discomfort led to sleep disruptions and a reduced functional capacity, including sports activities and social relationships.

**Impacts of eczema on infants:** Infants with eczema exhibit chronic itching and scratching, mood changes, and sleep disturbance. Preschool children have been shown to be excessively dependent, shy, and fearful.

**Impacts of eczema on family life and spousal relationships:** Having a child at home with eczema also impacts family life and spousal relationships. Overall, fewer mothers of preschool children with eczema work, leading to greater financial burdens and social isolations. The family carries a high financial burden of parental missed days from work for doctor visits and home care, lost wages as a result of interruption of employment, and the costs of medication, special or additional bedding, clothes and food.

## What's the best way to treat eczema?

### Skincare

Skincare is important. Moisturize daily, which keeps the skin soft, and prevents the skin from cracking. Patients should use a moisturizer that does not contain fragrances. Your doctor is your best source of advice.

Do not use hot water when bathing. Bathe with a lukewarm soaking bath for less than 5 minutes, to avoid the loss of sebum that protects the skin. After the bath, pat (do not rub) the skin dry with a towel. Then apply moisturizer immediately. Avoid using any bathing products containing fragrances. Choose mild soaps or soap replacements (such as creams and ointments).

Eczema can be very itchy. Scratching causes rashes, leading to the vicious cycle of scratching. It is important to stop the scratching. To prevent from scratching, children and adults can keep their finger nails trimmed. Infants should wear cotton gloves. These measures can reduce the harm caused by scratching.

### Lifestyle

- Change bedding and wash the linens regularly to reduce the dust level
- Clean and remove dusts regularly
- No carpets in bedrooms
- Avoid having pets, or at least do not sleep with pets
- Wear cotton clothing, avoid wool, nylon and acrylics
- Avoid bubble bath, and use less soap
- Use products that do not contain fragrances
- Use air-conditioner and dehumidifier during summers, to keep temperature and humidity levels stable
- A controlled life can help to reduce stress

### Medication

#### Commonly used medication for external use

- Ointments are effective in treatment of eczema, but are more greasy. Ointments may also cause acne on delicate skin area (such as the face and neck). Creams are easy to apply and suitable for delicate skin.
- Moisturizers can soften and smoothen the skin. If the affected skin area is large, then children may need to apply moist dressing.
- Steroid creams and ointments for external use are commonly used medication for the treatment of eczema. However, it must be used as directed by doctors. It can only be applied on skin areas affected by eczema. Only a small amount of medication is needed to be applied onto the surface of the skin.
- When the skin is cracked or severely scratched, bacterial infection may occur. Doctors will prescribe antibacterial medication (such as external ointments or bathing formulae) to treat or prevent infections.
- Patients can also use the new **non-steroid** topical medication under the class of "Selective Inflammatory Cytokines Inhibitor". It will act directly on the skin area where inflammation occurs and is also suitable for more sensitive and delicate skin area such as the face and neck.

#### (Narrow Band Ultra Violet B Light and PUVA)

Narrow-band UVB refers to a specific wavelength of ultraviolet (UV) radiation which helps to restore the immunology of the patients.

### Oral medication

- Oral medication may be required if the condition is severe. These may include oral steroids and other medication, such as ciclosporin and azathioprine. Oral medication can help suppress inflammation. It must be used as directed by doctors. Otherwise, severe adverse events may occur.