

Itching and scratching

How to control
eczema-related itching
and sleep disturbance



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Itching and scratching

How to control eczema-related itching and sleep disturbance

About this booklet

For most people, itching is the worst and most uncomfortable symptom of eczema and it can often be the most difficult to treat. Itching can also lead to sleep problems for both the person with eczema and their family.

This booklet aims to help you to understand why eczema makes you itch, how itching and scratching affect your skin, and how you can help to reduce or control the itch. The information given will also help you to understand how itching and scratching can affect your sleep, and that of your family, and show you how to get a better night's sleep.

Once I started scratching I found it impossible to stop. The advice and help from the National Eczema Society has helped me to cope with these distressing bouts.

RUTH, AGED 24

I couldn't have coped without the National Eczema Society. Finding I wasn't the only one to go through this and being able to talk to others who have, was a lifesaver. The support and advice I have got from them helped me to see that you can pull through.

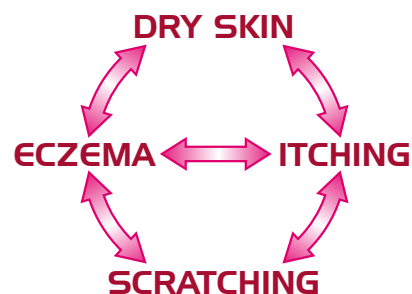
HELEN, AGED 32

Why does eczema itch?

Unfortunately the whole answer to this is not known. Skin that is affected by eczema releases certain chemicals, which then stimulate the nerves. These nerves then pass on the sensation of itch to the brain and before you know it you are scratching. There are lots of chemical mediators released into the skin which make us itch. Interestingly, histamine is now not thought to be related to itch in atopic eczema. This is why only sedating anti-histamines help eczema: by helping the person with eczema to sleep. Once your brain

has told you that you have an itch, the natural reaction is to scratch.

Scratching is one of the main causes of skin redness and irritation that occur in someone who has eczema. It is scratching that damages the skin, not the itch. Once you have started to scratch you will probably find that you start to scratch more and this leads to what is called the itch-scratch cycle. Many people also find that scratching gives them a lot of pleasure and this can be another reason why trying to stop scratching is so hard.



What does scratching do to the skin?

At first, scratching the skin produces redness and then a rash and irritation. If scratching continues, the skin can become broken and bleed. Once the skin has been broken, there is a risk of infection. Broken skin also allows irritants and allergens such as pollen,

soap and detergents to enter the skin easily and cause a reaction, which in turn will make the itching worse and may cause the eczema to flare up.

If someone has been scratching the same area for a long time, the skin will start to thicken – this is called lichenification. The skin looks like leather and can take weeks or months to return to its normal thickness. Lichenification can also cause changes in the colour of the skin, making it darker or lighter. These darker or lighter patches will eventually fade, but may take some time.

Fortunately, most scratched skin heals up very well over time and scarring is very unusual. However, if the eczema has been poorly controlled over a long period of time and scratching and picking has been intense, some scarring may occur.

What makes itching worse?

Almost all forms of eczema produce an itch and there are many things that can make itching worse. The following are some of the main triggers:

- Temperature: changes in temperature can often cause the skin to itch. For example, it is



quite common for the temperature of the skin to change when you are getting dressed or undressed, and when you are in bed at night. Night-time overheating in children is a feature of atopic eczema and can lead to loss of sleep for all the family. Bedrooms and bathrooms that are too warm may also lead to overheating.

- Sweating: sweat is an irritant. People with eczema often find that they itch more after activities such as playing sport or cycling.
- Clothing: some clothing fibres can be very irritating to the skin. For

example, wool has quite coarse, stiff fibres and these can irritate the skin causing it to itch. Rough seams, labels and loose threads can have the same effect.

- Irritant substances: many substances irritate the skin and cause it to itch. Allergens such as house-dust-mite droppings, pet dander and pollen can make itching much worse. But it is important to remember that not everyone with eczema will react to the same thing and some people will find that they are not affected by some allergens at all. Soap and detergents are common causes of irritation, leading to itching. Certain chemicals and foods that are either eaten or touched can also be a problem for some people. Many eczema patients will know which substances can affect their skin – usually through trial and error.
- Psychological factors: stressful situations can have an effect upon your itching. People can itch in response to certain feelings and, for children in particular, tiredness can make eczema more irritated.

Coping with the itch

Treatments for itching

As well as the practical tips on page 7, there are also treatments available from your healthcare professional that may help to reduce or control itching. Remember that using emollients (medical moisturisers) and any other prescribed treatments, will help to reduce irritation.

Emollients

Emollients will help you to keep the skin well moisturised, reducing dryness and forming a thin layer on the skin reducing water loss through the skin barrier. They are completely safe to use and can be applied as often as is necessary, but should be applied at least twice a day: more often if the skin is very dry. There is a wide range of emollients on the market, many of which are available on prescription. It may be a case of trial and error to find the emollient that suits you or your child best. Some emollients contain anti-itching ingredients called lauromacrogols, which are local anaesthetics that you may find useful.



Oats contain a natural anti-itching ingredient, and there are a couple of ranges of emollient that contain oats or oat milk – ask your healthcare professional for details. Alternatively, you can add a handful of oatmeal to hot water in a jug, stir it and allow it to settle, and then pour the milky liquid into the bath water. Or put the oatmeal in piece of muslin or stocking hung over the tap for the same effect.

Topical steroids

If the eczema and itching fail to respond to the use of emollients alone, additional treatments – usually a topical steroid – may need to be prescribed for short term flare treatment to help reduce the irritation. Before deciding which topical steroid to prescribe, the healthcare professional will take into account the

age of the patient, where the eczema is situated, its severity and other medications being taken. Usually they will start with the mildest topical steroid required to bring the eczema flare up back under control. Topical steroids are quite safe to use provided that you follow the instructions of your healthcare professional.

Wet and dry wraps

Wet and dry wrapping with tubular bandages or garments are both used to control the symptoms of eczema. They can help to reduce the amount of itching which in turn helps you or your child to sleep. In wet wrapping warm, wet tubular bandages or garments are put onto the body over lots of emollient and sometimes a mild or moderately potent topical steroid. A dry layer of bandage is then applied over the wet layer. The whole body can be covered, apart from the scalp, and the bandages can be left on overnight and throughout the day.

Dry tubular bandages or garments can also be used and are particularly useful for relatively small patches of eczema such as elbows, wrists, knees and ankles. This time a dry tubular bandage or garment is put on top of lots of emollient and sometimes a mild or moderately potent topical steroid.

Dry and wet wrapping – especially wet wrapping – are intense treatments lasting five to seven days. Wet and dry wrapping should only be used if recommended by health professionals trained in the management of eczema. It is essential that you are given a demonstration of how to apply them, as treatment can be complex. Wrapping and bandaging can be very time-consuming and should not be used to treat mild eczema. Wraps, bandages and garments should not be used if the skin is infected. Covering the skin up with bandages and garments makes topical steroids more potent, so only use topical steroids under bandages, wraps and garments with the advice of your healthcare professional.

Topical immunomodulators

The topical immunomodulators, Eldiel (pimecrolimus) and Protopic (tacrolimus) are also known as topical inhibitors. They are non-steroidal cream or ointment that is applied to the skin for flare treatment and, in the case of Protopic, twice a week for maintenance. They are licensed for use in treating atopic eczema in adults and children of 2 years of age and over. Topical immunomodulators act on the cells in the body and the skin to dampen down the immune system, which helps to reduce



inflammation and makes the skin less itchy and red.

Habit reversal

Habit reversal is available in some hospitals around the country that have access to a trained clinical psychologist. The programme works well in older children and adults and is mainly for people with long-term atopic eczema. The treatment helps people to realise when and why they are scratching and then helps them to find an alternative to scratching. People are encouraged to look again at the treatments that they are using and to identify triggers that together can reduce the amount that they scratch. In the long term this means less damage to the skin and reduced need for topical steroids and other treatments. Talk to your healthcare professional to find out if habit reversal is offered in your area.

A useful self-help book on habit reversal has been written by Sue Armstrong-Brown with the cooperation of Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, where Sue learnt the technique. The book is published by Vermillion and is available on the Amazon website. You can also find out more about habit reversal on www.atopicskindisease.com

Hypnotherapy

Hypnotherapy is not the same as the hypnosis that you might have seen on television. There have been some studies that have investigated the use of hypnotherapy to reduce itching in people who have eczema. There does seem to be some benefit in helping people to 'see' their itch and learn to control it. Children can also benefit from hypnotherapy. It is important to find a properly qualified hypnotherapist. See further information on page 12.

Herbal treatments

Western herbal medicines and creams are generally screened in order to reduce the risk of them being toxic and they are available in pharmacies and health-food shops. Some of these treatments – particularly those containing calendula, borage or

evening primrose oil – have provided relief from itching for some people, but there is no scientific evidence that these ingredients work in treating eczema. Herbal creams that come from other parts of the world have been found to contain topical steroids.

It is important to remember that the word 'natural' does not necessarily mean safe. As with all creams, test on a patch skin before applying all over. The inside of the elbow is a good test site. Wait for 24 to 48 hours to see if there is any adverse reaction.

Practical tips

- Use emollients frequently but lightly so that the skin glistens. Emollients will help to keep the skin intact and well moisturised, reducing irritation from allergens and irritants. Reapply before the skin becomes dry again.
- Always apply emollients in smooth downward strokes. Do not rub them in as this can make itching worse.
- Keep nails short and make sure there are no jagged edges.
- After washing and bathing, pat the skin dry with a soft towel rather than rubbing.

- Use cotton sheets and blankets on beds or low-tog (4.5) duvets filled with man made fibre, not feathers, to prevent overheating in bed.
- Try cotton gloves or mittens and, for children, use all-in-one sleep-suits. These measures will help to reduce the damage from scratching the skin, especially at night.



- Aim to distract yourself or your child from the itch. Watch a DVD, read a book, go out or give children toys to play with or an activity to do.
- Try not to say 'don't scratch' to children or adults who are scratching. A lot of scratching is done without the person even realising that they are doing it. Shouting at someone who is scratching could create resentment

and distress and increase feelings of stress. Instead, offer to help moisturise and turn it into a soothing action.

- Try to substitute some other action for scratching. You may find it helpful to press a nail onto the skin or pinch the skin gently instead of scratching. Parents and partners sometimes find that if they moisturise and massage the skin gently for their child or partner, it helps to cut down on potential skin damage.
- For very itchy patches of skin, some people find a bag of frozen peas or something similar wrapped in a towel and placed on the skin will help. Avoid putting ice directly onto the skin.
- Applying cool emollient creams or lotions (not ointments) that have been kept in the fridge may help, although some people find the exact opposite – it is warm emollients that are most soothing.
- Keep cool. Make sure that you use several light cotton layers, rather than having one heavy and warm layer of clothing or bedding, so that you can adjust your body temperature to suit you. Keep bedrooms cool and ventilate rooms on a regular basis.



- Talk to your dermatologist, GP or nurse regularly about your treatments to make sure that you are using what is best for you at that time.

Sleep disturbance

If you or your child has eczema, it is likely that you or they will at some point have had disturbed sleep. Waking in the night can lead to a relentless succession of broken nights over weeks or months, leaving you or your child utterly exhausted and irritable. The waking in the night disturbs not just the person with eczema but affects other family members as well. In one study, which looked at families

with a child with eczema, the child, the parents and the siblings were all affected by a child whose sleep was disturbed by their eczema. In severe cases the night-time itching and scratching may lead not only to tiredness and irritability but to lack of concentration at – or absences from – work and school. Tension and stress can also arise within a family or between partners.

People with eczema and their parents or partners can be deprived of proper sleep for long periods of time. Inevitably, this will affect every aspect of life.

Why does eczema affect sleep?

Many people scratch in their sleep and will sometimes wake up because of this. One piece of research showed that children with atopic eczema spent between 13 and 136 minutes each night scratching and scratched between 20 and 97 times. This is much more than people who do not have eczema.

During the day, it is often possible to distract yourself or your child when you feel that you need to scratch, but even so it can be hard to resist the temptation to scratch. At night, distraction is much more difficult.

Once in bed, people with eczema can get very hot and this can cause them to itch. People with atopic eczema may be affected by the droppings of house-dust mites, which live unseen in mattresses and bedding. Again this can mean increased itchiness at night. Waking at night can become a habit. Children will sometimes disturb their parents at night in order to receive comfort and attention, and this can make life difficult.

Try to avoid letting your child climb into bed with you. Your bed is likely to be warmer than your child's bed and this in itself may make the child itch more. It is better to go to the child's room to give comfort and then be firm and let the child fall asleep in their own room.

If you have eczema and you are disturbing your partner at night, it may be worth having an alternative place to sleep for a few nights when your eczema is very bad and you are restless.

Treatments for sleep disturbance

Antihistamines

Antihistamines that cause drowsiness can be useful at night. Ideally, they should be used in short bursts of a few days, when the eczema is very



bad and you are or your child is having a lot of trouble sleeping. They can be used safely in the long term.

There are a few to choose from – you can buy some from your pharmacist and others are available on prescription. Non-sedating antihistamines are of no use for people with eczema.

You need to take an antihistamine about one hour before going to bed as this will give time for it to work and make it less likely that you will have a hangover effect in the morning.

Children can only take some antihistamines over a certain age and, in some cases, they can make children more active instead of drowsy.

You should talk to your healthcare professional before giving your child antihistamines, or before taking them yourself. Your healthcare professional may suggest other sedative medicines for your child, in a syrup form, which are safe if given in short bursts.

If you are intending to start a family, check with your healthcare professional which antihistamines are safe for you to use.

Sleep clinics

Some hospitals have sleep clinics that can help individuals and families whose lives are disrupted by sleep problems of all kinds. Ask your GP for further information.

Practical tips for sleep

- If you or your child is itchy enough to wake at night, it may be that the eczema is not well controlled. Ensure that you are applying plenty of moisturiser and use your topical steroid as prescribed by your healthcare professional. If this routine is not controlling the eczema, speak to your healthcare professional about stepping up

to stronger treatments. These treatments will be safe as long as you follow instructions from your healthcare professional in applying them and how long you use them for.

- Avoid the use of soap and ensure that bedding and clothing that touch the skin are made of cotton.
- Wet and dry wrap bandages and garments can be helpful as they help to protect the skin from scratching and rubbing (see page 5).
- Keep emollients at hand at night and put them on as soon as you or your child wakes up itching.
- Keep bedrooms cool during the day and the central heating low at night.
- You or your child should wear loose-fitting pyjamas or a light cotton nightdress.
- Take a bath or shower in warm water about an hour before going to bed, followed by plenty of moisturiser to cool the skin.
- Do not apply a greasy moisturiser too thickly as, if emollients are applied too thickly, they can make you or your child hot and sweaty.

- If you or your child has atopic eczema and you know – or strongly suspect – that you may be sensitive to house-dust-mite droppings, you may find it useful to try to reduce house-dust-mite levels by vacuuming frequently, dusting with a damp cloth and using house-dust-mite-proof covers for the mattress and bedding.
- Sometimes disturbed sleep can cause a lot of tension in families and in partnerships. Talking about the effect that eczema is having upon sleep and being honest about how you feel is vital.



Further information and support from the National Eczema Society

More information than can be given in a booklet of this size is available from the National Eczema Society. We have other booklets including **Childhood Atopic Eczema: Your questions answered**, **Living with Eczema: a guide for adults** and **Could I have contact dermatitis?**

We also offer a wide variety of detailed factsheets on:

- Types of eczema, including by reference to the part of the body affected (e.g. ear or face).
- Treatments for eczema.
- Practical factors that might affect eczema.

Booklets can be ordered from our Helpline, as can factsheets. Alternatively, you can also download our fact sheets from www.eczema.org

We are proud of the wealth of information available on our website and recommend you visit it whenever you need information. It is up-dated frequently.

Eczema Helpline: **0800 0891122** or helpline@eczema.org

Our free* confidential telephone and email **Eczema Helpline** is at the heart of our work, providing information, support and reassurance to people struggling to cope with eczema.

Each year, thousands of people benefit from contacting our confidential

Eczema Helpline via email or telephone. We are not medically qualified and do not diagnose, prescribe, give medical advice or opinions on treatments prescribed by your healthcare professional. We do however offer a wealth of practical information about the day to day management of eczema and the different treatment options available.

Open to all UK residents who are personally affected by eczema. Please allow five working days for us to reply to you if using the email. We are not able to answer queries from non-UK residents as terminology, healthcare systems and treatments may differ in your country of residence, which may cause confusion.

Our telephone helpline is open Monday to Friday 8.00am to 8.00pm.

*Calls are free from BT landlines. Other providers and mobile services may charge for calls.

Exchange magazine: a 48 page quarterly magazine published by the National Eczema Society packed with:

- articles on eczema management
- features by people with eczema sharing their experiences
- treatment and research news
- experts' replies to your questions.

You can subscribe to Exchange - £20 p.a. - at www.eczema.org or by calling our administrative office on **0207 281 3553**.



National Eczema Society

Hill House
Highgate Hill
London N19 5NA

Eczema Helpline: 0800 089 1122

email: helpline@eczema.org

www.eczema.org

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The information in this booklet is only a general guide.

Individual circumstances differ and the National Eczema Society does not prescribe, give medical advice or endorse products or treatments. We hope you will find the information useful but it does not replace and should not replace the essential guidance given by your doctor and other healthcare professionals.

Writer: Jill Peters RGN BSc(Hons) DipNP,
Nurse Prescriber.

Updated April 2013 by Julie Van Onselen,
RGN RSCN DipN (Hons).

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