Everything You Need to Know About Eczema

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What Is Eczema? Types, Causes, Triggers and More

Eczema is an unpleasant but common skin condition that can occur at any age. If you've experienced any of the symptoms, you might be asking yourself, "What is eczema?" In addition to the uncomfortable physical symptoms, the appearance of the skin can also cause many sufferers to lose their confidence.

If you or a loved one is suffering from eczema, you've come to the right place. Keep reading to learn more about this distressing skin condition and how to find relief.

Understanding Eczema

Eczema is a type of skin inflammation—also known as dermatitis—that commonly presents with itchy, red, flaky and raised skin rashes. Other symptoms may include blistering, discoloration, raised bumps, weeping, crusting and thickened skin.

It is essentially the result of a breakdown in the skin's protective barrier, allowing moisture to leave and letting microbes and allergens enter the skin.

It can occur on any part of the body, but most people have it appear on their face, scalp, arms and the backs of the legs.

You may be familiar with frantically taking your little one to the doctor after the sudden appearance of an itchy facial rash. This is because eczema is often seen in children younger than 2 years old where it's known as atopic, or infantile eczema. Many cases of atopic eczema clear up by age 5, but can continue into adolescence and adulthood.

Types

Did you know there are different types of eczema?

While atopic eczema is the most common, other forms of eczema come with their own unique symptoms.

Contact eczema, also known as allergic contact dermatitis, occurs when the skin breaks out in an itchy red rash after contact with a specific irritant or allergen.

Women are more frequently affected by a form of eczema known as **dyshidrotic dermatitis**. This causes blisters as well as patches of flaky, itchy, painful and cracked skin on the feet, hands and fingers.

In the winter months, men may suffer from **nummular dermatitis** on their legs, where it presents as itchy, crusty and dry circular patches.

Another form of eczema is known as **seborrheic dermatitis,** which results in itchy, rough and inflamed patches of skin that can be oily and yellow. This type of eczema is also called cradle cap and predominantly occurs on the scalp, eyelids, eyebrows, nose and ears.

Older people, those who are immobile, and people with circulatory problems may develop **stasis dermatitis** that affects the lower limbs. This results in swelling, sores, redness and itchy skin due to sluggish circulation.

Causes of Eczema

You may be wondering why you struggle with itchy eczema every winter while other people in your household are unaffected.

We don't yet fully understand the cause of this condition, but we know several factors increase one's risk of developing the condition. This includes a mixture of genetics, immune system dysfunction, stress and exposure to irritants.

Interestingly, a strain of bacteria called Staphylococcus aureus has been found in high volumes on the skin of eczema sufferers during flare-ups.

Triggers

Everyone is different and will have different triggers, but some of the most common environmental eczema triggers include:

- Antibacterial soap.
- Skincare products.
- Cosmetics.
- Perfume.
- Household cleaning products.
- Cigarette smoke.
- Pollen.
- Mould.
- Pet dander.
- Dust mites.
- Metal jewelry.
- Synthetic clothing.
- Dry air.
- Excessive sweating.

Certain foods can be a major trigger for some sufferers, as they cause an immune reaction, resulting in an inflammatory response. This may include foods such as milk, seafood, eggs, soy, peanuts and wheat.

Mental and emotional stress is another known trigger of the condition, and this can be a vicious cycle. The initial stress that triggers a flare-up often leads to more stress due to unpleasant symptoms and self-consciousness.

Diagnosing Eczema

When it comes to persistent skin rashes and irritation, you should see your doctor or dermatologist to get an accurate diagnosis and rule out other skin conditions.

Unfortunately, there is no laboratory test to confirm the presence of eczema. However, they will take a thorough health history and examine your skin to diagnose and pinpoint the type of eczema you may be experiencing.

Your doctor may do an allergy test known as a patch test. During this test, certain allergens will be applied directly to your skin via a patch and according to the reaction, this may help to identify or rule out eczema triggers.

Treatment

During a severe eczema flare-up, your doctor may prescribe antihistamines or cortisone cream to provide symptomatic relief. However, you must address your lifestyle when looking to treat this condition.

Here are some of the top treatment tips:

- Avoid the use of irritating, synthetic fabrics and wear soft, cooling fabrics like cotton and silk.
- Stop using harsh cosmetics on the skin and avoid washing your clothes with strong detergents.
- Ask your doctor for a gentle skin moisturizer that contains vitamin E to soothe dryness and itching.
- Make a cool compress by soaking a cloth in cold water and wringing it out before placing it against the skin. This may help to soothe the rash and temporarily relieve itching.
- A flare-up may be a sign that you need to take a break and de-stress. Incorporate stress-reduction interventions, such as talking to a counselor, getting more sleep, exercising, meditation and practicing breathing exercises.
- Take a daily zinc supplement. This is an important mineral for skin function and zinc levels are low in eczema sufferers.
- Invest in a good-quality probiotic supplement as there is some evidence to suggest that taking probiotics may help to manage the symptoms of eczema.
- Avoid common trigger foods and eat a diet high in anti-inflammatory foods like fish, olive oil, brightly colored fruit and vegetables and dark green leafy vegetables.

If you've been diagnosed with eczema or suspect that you have it, this doesn't mean you'll be plagued for life. The right lifestyle changes, remedies, and medication will go a long way in helping you achieve a life without the burdens of this condition.