



# Eczema and Dairy Allergies: Is There Any Connection?

by AILEEN BARRO

---

## Eczema and Dairy

It is a well-known fact that atopic dermatitis, more commonly known as eczema, can be triggered by various allergens such as house dust mites, detergent, pollen and pet dander. But is there a link between certain foods and eczema, particularly dairy products like milk, cheese and butter? Let's take a look at the connection between eczema and dairy.

### Can Dairy Consumption Trigger Eczema?

It may be possible for dairy products to contribute to the severity of eczema by inducing itching, which leads to skin lesions. Early experiments showed that food allergens can be absorbed after food intake and elicit systemic reactions such as flares.

The consensus is that dairy products or any other foods do not cause eczema, but they can be a trigger and worsen symptoms. Recent guidelines for atopic dermatitis do not support a restrictive diet to manage eczema. If food avoidance is necessary, it should be under the guidance of a dietician or an allergist.

### Eczema and Food Triggers

It is now widely accepted that food allergens influence eczema, but the level of effect is still unclear. The five common food allergens with a possible link to eczema are milk, eggs, soy, wheat and peanuts; milk and eggs having the closest association.

The link between food and eczema goes way back in history. In an article published in the British Medical Journal in 1882, a senior surgeon claimed to cure a young boy with severe eczema by placing him on a modified diet. Milk was diluted with two parts of water. Fatty foods, like butter, and oily fish such as salmon, eels and herrings were eliminated. According to the surgeon, with this method he was able to improve the patient's eczema "within ten days of commencing the regimen."

Today's modern diet has been defined by a high consumption of refined sugar, meat, oils and processed food. Although a number of people say that their symptoms tend to get worse after eating a particular food, doctors caution against blindly eliminating food groups, especially in developing children.

### Food Allergies and Eczema

Whether food allergies are the cause of flares or something that just occurs at the same time is still being debated. A systematic review of 66 studies revealed that there is a link between atopic dermatitis, food sensitization and food allergies, with increased severity and duration of atopic dermatitis more strongly associated with food allergies.

---

Despite anecdotal evidence, there is currently no reliable evidence that shows that specific foods cause eczema or trigger flares. The general understanding is that eczema occurs before the food allergy. Less than two out of 10 children with eczema develop a food allergy. Cow's milk protein allergy (CMPA) is one of the most common allergies in children younger than 1 year old. A protein found in cow's milk triggers an allergic reaction and may cause rashes and eczema after drinking or eating products derived from cow's milk. It is more prevalent in children with existing eczema, asthma, or hay fever. At 6 years old, about 90% of children will have a tolerance to the protein and will no longer have symptoms.

### **What Is a Food Elimination Diet?**

Avoidance of certain food has improved the course of eczema in many cases. Foods often excluded in an elimination diet are fish, milk, eggs and peanuts. Sugar and gluten have not been found to play a role in the development of eczema.

What do experts suggest? In several studies, there was no clear difference between the groups of participants on an exclusion diet and those who were not. Good quality studies are still needed to know whether eliminating certain food from your diet is effective for eczema. Experts believe that an elimination diet can help, but only if you have a confirmed food allergy to those foods; this is known as a targeted elimination diet).

### **Allergy Testing**

Skin prick tests, patch tests and blood IgE tests are used to diagnose allergies to airborne substances such as pollen, pet dander and dust mites. These tests are not as reliable when it comes to food.

Food allergy testing often leads to false-positive results, which suggests that food does not affect a person's eczema. On the other hand, a negative result does not necessarily mean that the food is not making the symptoms worse.

In general, testing for food allergies is not recommended unless you are thought to have a specific allergy. If a test comes out positive, the result must be confirmed using the oral food challenge. This should be carried out by experienced physicians in a medical setting equipped for an emergency.

### **My Experience With the Elimination Diet**

When I was diagnosed with eczema at a young age, my parents strictly forbade me from eating greasy fried food, milk and sugary drinks. I'm not really sure if it helped. The eczema rash cleared after a few months, but we attributed it to the ointment that was prescribed to me.

When I went back to eating normally, I did not develop a new rash until my late 20s. I have had hand eczema for a while now and it is aggravated by the constant use of detergents. While I do feel better overall when I consciously choose healthy foods, eating dairy, eggs or meat on a daily basis does not make my symptoms worse. I also have no known food allergies. It is probably safe to say that consuming dairy does not trigger eczema flares, at least for me.

It is not always a good idea to remove common foods from your diet unless you are allergic to them. Studies have shown that totally excluding food from a child's diet can lead to a worse allergic reaction when that food is reintroduced.