

Keep the itch under control

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Managing symptoms of eczema can help to soothe and relieve the condition

By Cheryl Tay

Do you often suffer from dry skin that feels itchy and gets inflamed?

You may suffer from atopic dermatitis, or eczema, as it is more commonly known.

Eczema is an abnormal barrier function of the skin that undergoes increased water loss, dryness and sensitivity and penetration from allergens.

Those who suffer from eczema often feel agitated and irritable due to the itchiness. They resort to scratching for temporary relief and then get into a vicious cycle of intense discomfort when they cannot help but continue to scratch when the itch returns and becomes too intense to bear.

"Eczema is the most common type and it is an inflammation of the skin that usually starts in early childhood, tending to flare up from time to time," says Dr Liew Woei Kang, consultant paediatrician, paediatric allergist and immunologist at SBCC Baby and Child Clinic, Gleneagles Medical Centre and Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre.

"About two in 10 school children in Singapore have some degree of eczema, but their condition typically fades significantly or a large proportion of them resolves completely by the time they hit mid-

teenage years," adds Dr Liew, who is also a visiting consultant paediatrician at the KK Women's and Children Hospital.

Children affected with this skin condition may also miss out on activities that their classmates can take part in.

The cause of eczema is unknown and while it cannot be fully cured, regular skin moisturisers can help to improve the barrier defect, which is the root cause of eczema.

The goal of treatment is to minimise the debilitating effects of the disease through good skin care.

Dr Liew says those with a family history of allergic disease should breastfeed their newborn infant or use hypoallergenic milk formula if breastfeeding is not established as the primary prevention measure for eczema.

There are several important steps in treating eczema. Avoid scratching and steer clear of irritants such as harsh soaps, heat and sweat, as well as proven triggers such as house dust mites and food allergies. One can also moisturise regularly and use topical creams that can help to reduce and prevent inflammation such as steroids.

Oral medication may be used to relieve itch or treat secondary bacterial infections.

There is a specialised topical cream, Atopiclair™ which is a non-steroidal flare-remission cream for eczema that can significantly reduce itch and tame flares, thereby helping to break the vicious itch-scratch-worry cycle.

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"It is very important to seek early treatment as the eczema can get more extensive and the affected skin becomes thicker, darker in colour, itchier and more resistant to treatment," says Dr Lim Yen Loo, consultant dermatologist at the National Skin Centre.

Dr Lim also advises that getting enough rest and finding ways to reduce stress is important, as "stress has been observed by many to be a trigger of eczema flares".

"Longstanding eczema may potentially be associated with more psychosocial disturbances, inability to concentrate or absenteeism at school or work," she adds.



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1. Boguniewicz et al. J Paediatr 2008;152:854-9 2. Abramovits et al. J Drugs Dermatol 2006;5(3):236-224

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