

Prevent eczema with the right milk

Breast or hydrolysed milk may prevent, delay or mitigate eczema in babies at high risk.

Wong Sher Maine reports

One of the most distressing sights for parents is of their baby with dry, red and itchy patches on his skin which he scratches till it bleeds. Often, the discomfort is so great that the baby cannot sleep.

This can happen to a baby who has eczema, a skin disease, the prevalence of which is on the rise among children in Singapore.

In 2006, a report in the medical journal *Lancet* noted the proportion of six- and seven-year-olds in Singapore with eczema rose from 2.8 per cent to 8.9 per cent in seven years, the reasons for which is unknown.

Eczema is believed to be caused by a genetic predisposition that is triggered by environmental factors, such as dust mites, heat and stress.

While there is no foolproof way of preventing eczema, what is known is that giving babies the right milk might go some way in helping to prevent, delay or mitigate its onset.

This would benefit babies because eczema can affect their quality of life as it cannot be cured.

Dr Henry Loh, a dermatologist in private practice, said: "Eczema can severely affect the quality of sleep, study and play of a child. The uncontrollable scratching will damage the skin and may sometimes cause an infection. It gives the child a poor quality of life in severe cases."

In a study published in the *British Journal Of Dermatology* in 2006, 379 children aged five to 16 with chronic skin conditions, such as eczema, felt that their lives were bad in the same way as children with diseases perceived as more serious, such as epilepsy and kidney disease, felt, because of the itching and pain.

Preventive measures are particularly important for babies at high risk of developing eczema.

This would be when either one or both of the parents have the skin condition or have a history of allergies such as asthma or allergic rhinitis, said Dr Liew Woei Kang, a paediatric allergist and immunologist at Gleneagles Medical Centre.



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Infants at high risk of developing eczema (above), whose mothers are unable to breastfeed, can drink partially hydrolysed formula milk until they are one year old. After that, they can try formula milk.

The best milk for these babies, he said, is breast milk. They should be exclusively breastfed for four to six months until their digestive systems are more mature.

Agreeing, Professor Lee Bee Wah, a consultant paediatrician and clinical paediatric immunologist and allergist at Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre, said: "Breast milk is known to have immune factors from the mother that could protect the baby from developing allergies and eczema."

"It is probably the best known protective factor, but even then, the evidence of protection conferred is not extremely robust. This is largely due to difficulties in performing controlled and randomised studies on breastfeeding."

Ms Y. P. Ong, 36, who is working part-time as a clinic manager, fully breastfed her two older children for over two years.

There is a history of eczema and asthma in the family, but her two children, now aged six and four, did not develop eczema.

"Because of our family history, I breastfed them to protect them and to give them a better immune system," she said.

However, if the mother is unable to fully breastfeed for medical or other reasons, the recommended alternative is to feed the baby partially hydrolysed formula milk.

This is milk from cows in which the protein has

been broken down such that the body does not recognise it as a whole protein, so the milk is less likely to trigger an allergic response.

Such formula milk can be found on supermarket shelves and is usually labelled with the letters HA, which stand for hypoallergenic, meaning it is designed to lessen the chances of an allergic reaction.

Dr Liew recommended that infants at high risk of developing eczema, whose mothers are unable to successfully breastfeed, should drink partially hydrolysed formula milk until they are a year old. After that, they can try normal formula milk.

In a study done in Germany between 1995 and 1998, 2,252 babies with a family history of allergies were not fully breastfed, but were instead fed different types of formula milk in the first four months.

The study showed that the babies given partially hydrolysed milk were much less likely to develop eczema than the rest in their first three years of life.

However, the effects have not been proven to be long-lasting, Prof Lee said.

Such formula milk has also not been proven to protect a child from developing asthma and other allergies, she added.

For parents who cannot bear to see their babies scratching away, the short-term effects are good enough.

Ms Ong's third child, a 10-month-old girl, has developed eczema on the cheeks, neck and elbows.

She breastfeeds the baby, but gives the baby some formula milk when she is at work.

She recently changed the formula milk the baby was drinking to partially hydrolysed milk.

She said: "A friend's son had eczema and she said his sores cleared up after he went on hypoallergenic milk. That is one of my reasons for making the switch."

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Watch the food too

Of 10 children with eczema, between three and six are allergic to certain kinds of food, according to clinical practice guidelines on managing food allergy in young children here.

The guidelines were published by the Academy of Medicine and Ministry of Health in 2010.

Eczema does not cause food allergies, but children with the skin condition have a "generalised heightened allergic immune response" to anything from food to

environmental allergens, said Professor Lee Bee Wah, a consultant paediatrician and clinical paediatric immunologist and allergist at Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre.

Such food allergies may aggravate the symptoms of eczema or produce a rash which looks like eczema.

So if severe eczema persists in a child who is already being treated for the condition, parents should try to find out if the child is possibly allergic to certain types of food which are worsening the skin condition, said Dr Y. C. Chan, a

dermatologist at Gleneagles Medical Centre.

Common food culprits, in his experience, include milk from cows, egg, shellfish and bird's nest.

The Academy of Medicine and Ministry of Health guidelines suggest that children with persistent eczema be kept off common food culprits for up to a month to ascertain if the child has a food allergy.

Dr Chan said: "If food allergy is suspected, parents should consult their doctor for medical advice to confirm the allergy and distinguish it from food intolerance."

For babies who start on normal formula milk, food intolerance is when the baby is unable to digest certain nutrients in the milk from cows well or is sensitive to lactose, a sugar in the milk.

Symptoms include abdominal pain and cramps, bloating and excessive gas.

An allergy to milk from cows, however, is what Prof Lee calls "an abnormal immune response" to various proteins in the milk.

A baby with such an allergy may have more significant symptoms such as sleep disturbances, bloody stools or refusal to drink the milk.