

Soothing the itch of eczema

Why does eczema itch?

Everyone with eczema knows how itchy it is and how difficult it can be not to scratch. When your skin is dry and irritated it can get very itchy, so itch is the common symptom of dry skin conditions like eczema and dermatitis. The urge to scratch is especially difficult to resist for children and young infants who often get very hot, itchy and miserable at night. But with frequent use of emollients it is possible to sooth the itch, breaking the so called 'itch – scratch cycle'. This, and the simple tips below enable skin dryness and itch to be effectively managed and the eczema to improve.

What is the 'itch – scratch cycle'?

Scratching generally makes eczema worse and prevents skin repair. The more your skin is damaged by scratching, the more it hurts and itches and the more you continue to scratch. This is known as the 'itch – scratch cycle'. Constant scratching also triggers inflammation and makes the skin more likely to get infected. So it's really important to try not to scratch. By preventing the itch or relieving the itch, the itch – scratch cycle can be broken and you'll see the benefits with a real improvement in your eczema.

Preventing or soothing the itch

- Skin gets very itchy if it is allowed to dry out – keep it moist by using emollients regularly throughout the day.
- For best effect try using different formulations together to find a combination of emollients that suits you best – for example gently apply emollient cream during the day and use a more greasy ointment at bedtime.
- Apply cream gently in one direction; vigorous rubbing of the skin can trigger itching.
- When washing and taking baths avoid soaps, foam or bubble baths, all of which dry the skin.
- Bath water should be tepid or warm as hot water can make itching worse.
- If your doctor prescribes topical steroids continue with the emollient in between applications of the steroid to keep the skin moist and relieve the itching.
- Use plenty of emollient.

Beating the scratch

- To avoid scratching pat or rub the skin over clothes instead; if the itch is still troublesome pinch the skin.
- Never tell a child to stop scratching as it will not work; instead praise a child for not scratching.
- Cut finger and toe nails short; this may help to limit the damage.
- Keep a note of when itching is most frequent, and during those times try the following tips to help distract you from the itch –
 - Clench your fists and count to 30.
 - Keep your hands busy ie write, draw or do a puzzle.
 - Play a game.
- Reduce exposure to heat – keep bedrooms on the cool side and wash in warm water.
- Wear loose fitting or cotton clothes and pyjamas, and use cotton bed linen.
- At night put cotton gloves / mittens on children to stop them scratching.
- Use plenty of emollient.