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Atopic Dermatitis

What is atopic dermatitis (eczema)?

Atopic dermatitis is a particular type of itchy rash that looks like red scaly dry skin. This condition is also called eczema. The condition is fairly common, and may occur in as many as 5% of children.

The exact cause of atopic dermatitis is unknown. In many patients, there is a family history of allergic conditions, such as hives, hayfever, asthma or eczema. Rarely, atopic dermatitis in infants may be related to food sensitivity, such as sensitivity to milk, but this is often difficult to determine and manage. In the majority of cases, however, no allergic factors can be found.

What does atopic dermatitis look like?

Atopic dermatitis usually starts in infancy from the ages of 2 to 6 months. The skin is dry and the rash is quite itchy, so infants may be restless and rub against the sheets, or scratch if able. The rash may involve the face or it may cover a large part of the body. As the child gets older, the rash may become more localized. In early childhood, the rash is commonly on the legs, feet, hands and arms. As a person becomes older, the rash may be limited to the bend of the elbows, knees, on the back of the hands, feet, and on the neck and face. As the rash becomes more established, the dry itchy skin may become thickened, leathery and sometimes darker in color. The more the person scratches, the worse the rash is and the thicker the skin gets. Most children with atopic dermatitis outgrow the condition before school age; some continue to have problems as an adolescent or even as an adult. Bacteria, yeast, or viruses may sometimes infect atopic dermatitis often as the result of scratching. The rash may become red with pimple-like bumps and scabs. This may require antibiotic treatment.

What can I do to make the atopic dermatitis rash better?

1. Avoid contact with things that can worsen the itch. This includes soaps, detergents, fabric softeners, certain perfumes, dust, grass, and wool or other clothing that irritates the skin.
2. You may bathe daily but always use a skin moisturizer immediately after bathing. Limit bath or shower time and use lower temperature water (i.e., short warm showers are better than long hot showers). Use a mild soap, such as unscented Dove, Cetaphil, or Basis. When drying with the towel, pat, do not rub.
3. Put a moisturizing cream or ointment on the skin once or twice daily (Eucerin, Vaseline, or Lubriderm).
4. Try to keep the temperature and humidity in the home fairly constant. Use a bedroom air conditioner in the summer and a vaporizer or humidifier in winter. It is very important that the vaporizer or humidifier be cleaned well and frequently, since molds may grow in them.
5. Try to avoid scratching. Atopic dermatitis is often called "the itch that rashes" and it is known that scratching plays a very important role in making the dermatitis worse. Keep the fingernails trimmed short.
6. Adults and older children may try over-the-counter oral anti-itch medicines such as Benadryl (diphenhydramine).
7. Try 1% hydrocortisone cream twice daily to troublesome areas.
8. If the above things are insufficient to control the atopic dermatitis, prescription medications including higher strengths of hydrocortisone or steroid free Elidel cream or Protopic ointment can be used.

