Atopic Dermatitis (Eczema)

Atopic dermatitis is also called eczema. It is a common skin condition that causes dry, itchy, and inflamed skin. It is long-lasting and can flare up from time to time. It often starts in childhood but can begin at any age. It is not contagious.

Why it Happens

Atopic dermatitis happens when the skin barrier does not work well. This allows moisture to escape and irritants to get in. Several things can make it more likely:

- Family history of eczema, asthma, or allergies.
- Changes in weather (especially dry or cold air).
- Fragrances, soaps, or scratchy fabrics.
- Stress or sweating.
- Certain jobs or hobbies that involve frequent handwashing or exposure to chemicals.

Symptoms

- Itchy skin (often worse at night).
- Dry, rough, or scaly patches.
- Red or darker areas, depending on your skin tone.
- Thickened or leathery skin from repeated scratching.
- Small bumps that may ooze or crust.
- Rash that comes and goes, often in the same areas.

Treatment

There is no cure, but treatment can help you feel better and reduce flare-ups. Options include:

- **Moisturizers:** Thick, fragrance-free creams or ointments are best. They help seal in moisture and repair the skin barrier. These are better options than lotions that come in pump bottles that have too much water or alcohol. Ointments (like petroleum jelly) and thick white creams in tubs or squeeze tubes are more hydrating and longer lasting. Apply at least twice daily and always after bathing.
- **Topical steroids:** Help calm inflammation. Apply as prescribed.
- **Non-steroid creams:** Like tacrolimus or crisaborole. Often used on sensitive areas.
- **Antihistamines:** Can help with nighttime itching.
- **Severe eczema:** May be treated with light therapy or injections (like Dupilumab).

Home Care Tips

- Moisturize right after bathing. This locks in hydration.
- Take short, warm showers (5-10 minutes).
- Use fragrance-free skin and laundry products.
- Wear soft, breathable fabrics like cotton.
- Keep nails trimmed to avoid breaking the skin when scratching.
- Watch for and avoid your personal triggers.
- If needed, ask your doctor about wet wrap therapy to soothe inflamed skin.

Additional Information

Learn more at www.aad.org (search “atopic dermatitis”).

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person’s health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 11/2026 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#8556.