

# Health & Medicine

## Treating and Managing the Challenges of Eczema



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Seasonal weather changes can affect the condition of your skin. In winter, your skin may be covered up and safe from harmful overexposure to the sun's radiation, but you should monitor your skin during the winter months to help prevent skin conditions that can result from colder temperatures.

For those susceptible to flare-ups of eczema or atopic dermatitis, the most common type of eczema, winter's cold air and low humidity can dry out the skin and exacerbate the condition. It's important to have a skin moisturizing regimen as dry skin contributes to eczema flare-ups.

According to *U.S. News Health*, eczema is a common condition affecting roughly 15 percent of the nation's population. The causes of eczema are unclear, but are thought to be a combination of environmental triggers and heredity. Eczema erupts when scratched, rather than being a rash that itches. Therefore, it has been called "the itch that rashes." The condition is characterized by an intense itch sensation which, when scratched, becomes a patch of dry, red and irritated skin which may also ooze and crust. Eczema can come and go, as well as migrate around the body.

While the condition is not contagious, it is often long-term—90 percent of the 30 million Americans who have eczema were diagnosed before the age of five.

The most common areas of the body affected by this condition are the face, neck, elbows, knees and ankles. For infants, the forehead, cheeks, forearms, legs, scalp and neck are the common places. An eczema flare-up can last for a few hours or continue for days.

Eczema is a general term that covers many types of skin inflammation. Atopic dermatitis is a chronic and hereditary type of eczema occurring in people with a genetic predisposition. Other common types, such as contact dermatitis, are triggered by an environmental irritant, such as chemicals, detergent, food or clothing, and go away once the irritant is removed or avoided. However, people with atopic dermatitis will continue to have flares and their skin can be easily inflamed even when the trigger is no longer present.

Eighty-five percent of those who experience atopic dermatitis symptoms are infants and children under five, with the condition occurring in 10 to 20 percent of all babies, though it may also occur for the first time in adulthood. Aside from managing the discomfort and sleep disruption which atopic dermatitis causes, eczema treatment for infants and children is important to prevent the condition from getting worse. While many children outgrow it, eczema will persist in about 40 percent of youngsters with the skin condition.

There are many treatment options for eczema. Both over-the-counter and prescription medications can offer relief, but it's important

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to speak with a dermatologist about the best treatment for an individual. These skin specialists can answer questions about which types of cleansers and soaps to use, what to avoid and advise when prescription medication is necessary. Light therapy using ultraviolet light is another treatment option.

A dermatologist is also the best resource for treating other skin conditions that may be caused by eczema. People with eczema are more prone to certain conditions such as bacterial staph infections and viral warts because their skin barrier is compromised.

Diagnosing eczema can take some detective work, because there is no definitive

test or telltale sign. Physicians rely on the combination of a skin examination and medical history. Allergy tests such as patch or blood tests may be done to determine triggers. Family history can also be crucial to making an eczema diagnosis. A dermatologist may ask if relatives have eczema, or if they have asthma, hay fever or allergies, which are thought to be genetically linked to eczema. Prepare for a dermatologist's appointment by asking family members if they have these conditions.

Eczema is a challenging skin condition for which there is no cure, but it can be treated, controlled and managed. It can take a while to figure out the triggers and

what works best for an individual, yet with effort and education there is almost always improvement over time.

*Dr. Wendy Myers is a Board Certified medical dermatologist. She grew up in central New Jersey and completed her M.D. at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, where she received numerous academic achievement awards. She completed her medical dermatology residency at the University of Vermont as Chief Resident. To learn more about Windsor Dermatology, visit [www.WindsorDermatology.com](http://www.WindsorDermatology.com) or call 609.443.4500.*