

MEDfacts

An Educational Health Series From National Jewish Health®

ATOPIC DERMATITIS (ATOPIC ECZEMA)



What is Atopic Dermatitis?

Atopic dermatitis (AD) is a common chronic skin disease that also is called atopic eczema. The onset of AD is usually during the first five years of life. Atopic is a term used to describe allergic conditions such as asthma, hay fever and AD. People with AD tend to have dry, itchy and easily irritated skin. This can continue for years and may result in damage to the skin, especially when it is scratched.

What Causes Itching and Rash?

The exact cause of AD is not known. Research has shown that a person is more likely to have AD if parents or other family members have ever had AD, hay fever, asthma, or food allergies.

There are many things that worsen the itching and rash of AD. These are different for each person. It's important to work closely with your health care provider to try to figure out what makes your itching and rash worse.

The Itch-Scratch Cycle

Scratching or rubbing the skin can make the itch and rash of AD worse. Scratching causes further irritation, injures the skin, and increases inflammation. This is called the itch-scratch cycle.

Irritants

Almost anything can be irritating to the skin when the rash of AD is present. Chemicals, solvents, soaps, detergents, fragrances, some ingredients in skin care products, some fabrics, and smoke are irritants you may need to avoid.

Allergies

If you have a reaction to something you touch, breathe or eat you might have an allergy. Allergies can cause or worsen AD symptoms. Your health care provider may recommend prick or patch skin testing, blood tests, or food challenges to see if allergies

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are causing itching or rash. Allergens that worsen AD include foods, dust mites, furry animals, allergens in the air, as well as, certain chemicals. An important step in controlling allergy symptoms is to avoid things to which you are allergic.

Temperature and Humidity

Cold weather, heat and sweating may make AD worse. Extremes of temperature and humidity can be a problem for people with AD. Sweating caused by overheating and high humidity can irritate the skin. Low humidity causes water to be lost from the skin. This can lead to dryness and skin irritation.

Infections

Bacterial and viral skin infections occur more frequently than normal for people with AD. Bacteria are often present in higher than normal numbers on their skin. In addition, skin that has been scratched or has a rash is more easily infected. Talk with your health care provider if you think the skin is infected. Your health care provider may want to prescribe an antibiotic to treat the infection.

Dry Skin

Dry skin makes the itching and rash of AD worse. Wind, low humidity, some skin care products, and washing or bathing without proper moisturizing can cause dry skin. The most important treatment for dry skin is to put water back into it. The best way to get water into your skin is to soak in a bath. Gently pat dry and immediately apply a layer of moisturizer to seal the water in your skin. "Soak and seal" daily helps to prevent and treat dry skin.

Emotions and Stress

Emotions and stress do not cause AD, but they may bring on itching and scratching. Anger, frustration and embarrassment can cause flushing and itching. Day to day stresses as well as major stressful events can lead to or worsen the itch-scratch-itch.

What Medicines Will Help?

Medicines are added to your daily skin care when itching and rash are not well controlled. Medicines also are required if there is an infection present.

Topical steroids

Steroid medicines that are applied to the skin are called topical steroids. Topical steroids are drugs that treat inflammation. They come in many strengths and can be very helpful when rash is poorly controlled. Used correctly, topical steroids are safe and effective, but there can be side effects if used incorrectly.

Topical Immunomodulators

Topical immunomodulators (TIMS) are also medicines that are applied to the skin. They also treat inflammation, but are not steroids. TIMS don't cause steroid side effects. The most common side effect of TIMS is skin burning. This is often not a long-lasting problem. Used correctly, topical steroids are safe and effective, but there can be side effects if used incorrectly.

Tar Products

Skin and scalp products that contain coal tar extracts have long been used to reduce itching, red and inflamed skin. They may provide long lasting action against inflammation and have fewer side effects than some other medicines, but, at times, are irritating. Tar shampoos often are helpful for a red, itchy scalp.

Medicines That Fight Infection

Skin infections may be caused by bacteria (e.g., impetigo), fungus (e.g., athlete's foot), and viruses (e.g., herpes). Some antibiotics, antifungal and antiviral medications are applied to the skin. Some are pills or liquids taken by mouth.

Antihistamines

Antihistamines taken by mouth can help reduce itching. They are also used to control allergy symptoms. Some antihistamines cause drowsiness. This can make you feel less itchy and help you sleep.

New Treatments

Studies at National Jewish Health focus both on understanding the disease process, why patients with AD get more infections and looking at new treatments. If you are interested in receiving more information about clinical trials in atopic dermatitis, please contact us at 1-303-398-1549 or 1-303-398-1409.

How Can National Jewish Health Help?

AD can be very difficult to live with. Each person with AD deserves to learn what makes their symptoms worse, how to avoid them, and how to best treat them. This is different for each person. National Jewish is one of the leading institutions in the United States for treatment and research of AD. Patients treated at National Jewish benefit from our interactive, multi-disciplinary, team approach. Our philosophy of care for patients is for comprehensive evaluation and treatment which fits the needs and goals of the patient. At National Jewish, we provide single day consultations, multi-day outpatient visits or inpatient care for more extensive testing and treatment. If you have questions, please contact the National Jewish **LUNG LINE**®, at 1-800-222-LUNG.

Note: This information is provided to you as an educational service of LUNG LINE® (1-800-222-LUNG). It is not meant to be a substitute for consulting with your own physician.

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