Atopic eczema

**Atopic eczema, also known as atopic dermatitis, is the most common form of eczema. It mainly affects children, but can also affect adults.**

Eczema is a condition that causes the skin to become itchy, red, dry and cracked. It is a long-term (chronic) condition in most people, although it can improve over time, especially in children.

Atopic eczema can affect any part of the body, but the most common areas to be affected are:

* backs or fronts of the knees
* outside or inside of the elbows
* around the neck
* hands
* cheeks
* scalp

People with atopic eczema usually have periods when symptoms are less noticeable, as well as periods when symptoms become more severe (flare-ups).

What causes atopic eczema?

The exact cause of atopic eczema is unknown, but it's clear it's not down to one single thing. It often occurs in people who get [allergies](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/allergies/pages/introduction.aspx) – "atopic" means sensitivity to allergens.

It can run in families, and often develops alongside other conditions, such as [asthma](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/asthma/Pages/Introduction.aspx) and [hay fever](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/hay-fever/pages/introduction.aspx).

The symptoms of atopic eczema often have certain triggers, such as soaps, detergents, stress and the weather. Sometimes [food allergies](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/food-allergy/Pages/Intro1.aspx) can play a part, especially in young children with severe eczema.

Treating atopic eczema

There is currently no cure for atopic eczema, but treatment can help relieve the symptoms and many cases improve over time.

However, severe eczema often has a significant impact on daily life and may be difficult to cope with physically and mentally. There is also an increased risk of skin infections.

Many different treatments can be used to control symptoms and manage eczema, including:

* self care techniques, such as reducing scratching and avoiding triggers
* [emollients](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Emollients/Pages/Introduction.aspx) (moisturising treatments) – used on a daily basis for dry skin
* [topical corticosteroids](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/corticosteroid-preparations-(topical)/Pages/Introduction.aspx?url=Pages/What-is-it.aspx) – used to reduce swelling, redness and itching during flare-ups

Who is affected?

About one in five children in the UK has atopic eczema. In 8 out of 10 cases, the condition develops before a child reaches the age of five. Many children develop it before their first birthday.

Atopic eczema can improve significantly, or even clear completely, in some children as they get older. About half of all cases improve a lot by the time a child reaches 11 years, and around two-thirds improve by the age of 16.

However, the condition can continue into adulthood and can sometimes develop for the first time in adults.

Other types of eczema

Eczema is the name for a group of skin conditions that cause dry, irritated skin. Other types of eczema include:

* [discoid eczema](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Eczema-(discoid)/Pages/Introduction.aspx) – a type of eczema that occurs in circular or oval patches on the skin
* [contact dermatitis](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Eczema-(contact-dermatitis)/Pages/Introduction.aspx) – a type of eczema that occurs when the body comes into contact with a particular substance
* [varicose eczema](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Eczema-(varicose)-/Pages/Introduction.aspx) – a type of eczema that most often affects the lower legs and is caused by problems with the flow of blood through the leg veins
* [seborrhoeic eczema](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/dandruff/pages/introduction.aspx) – a type of eczema where red, scaly patches develop on the sides of the nose, eyebrows, ears and scalp
* [dyshidrotic eczema](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/pompholyx/Pages/Introduction.aspx) (pompholyx) – a type of eczema that causes tiny blisters to erupt across the palms of the hands

Symptoms of atopic eczema

**Atopic eczema causes areas of skin to become itchy, dry, cracked, sore and red.**

There will usually be periods where the symptoms improve, followed by periods where they get worse (flare-ups). Flare-ups may occur as often as two or three times a month.

Atopic eczema can occur all over the body, but is most common on the hands (especially fingers), the insides of the elbows or backs of the knees, and the face and scalp in children. The face is more commonly involved in adults.

The severity of atopic eczema can vary a lot from person to person. People with mild eczema may only have small areas of dry skin that are occasionally itchy. In more severe cases, atopic eczema can cause widespread red, inflamed skin all over the body and constant itching.

Scratching can disrupt your sleep, make your skin bleed, and cause secondary infections. It can also make itching worse, and a cycle of itching and regular scratching may develop. This can lead to sleepless nights and difficulty concentrating at school or work.

Areas of skin affected by eczema may also turn temporarily darker or lighter after the condition has improved. This is more noticeable in people with darker skin. It's not a result of scarring or a side effect of steroid creams, but more of a "footprint" of old inflammation and will eventually return to its normal colour.

Signs of an infection

Occasionally, areas of skin affected by atopic eczema can become infected. Signs of an infection can include:

* your eczema getting a lot worse
* fluid oozing from the skin
* a yellow crust on the skin surface or small yellowish-white spots appearing in the eczema
* the skin becoming swollen and sore
* a high temperature (fever) and generally feeling unwell

See your doctor as soon as possible if you think your or your child's skin may have become infected.