

What is Eczema?

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The word 'eczema' derives from a Greek word, 'ekzein' which means 'to break out or boil over'. Eczema is also called 'dermatitis' from the Greek word for skin. These terms are used interchangeably to describe a wide group of skin diseases that all share the symptoms of inflamed and itchy skin that 'boils over' into a rash when scratched.

Not all dry skin is eczema, however, and may simply be caused by cold and windy weather or after prolonged exposure to sunlight. Skin easily loses water in those conditions and may simply need hydration. The best way to know if you have eczema is to see a dermatologist.

Two Categories of Eczema

Eczema generally falls into two categories: eczema brought about by contact with irritants such as chemicals, powders, cleaning agents and perfumes; and eczema precipitated by allergy to a certain material such as nickel, chrome or rubber. This last is known as atopic eczema and is the most common type of eczema, particularly among children. Atopic eczema is thought to be hereditary among families with a history of asthma and allergies such as hay fever.

Other Eczema Skin Diseases

Other skin diseases in the eczema group are: dyshidrotic, nummular, and herpticum eczema.

Dyshidrotic Eczema

Dyshidrotic eczema, or hand eczema, usually affects the hands, and sometimes the soles of the feet and sides of the fingers and toes. The blisters that characterize this type of eczema are small and clear and cause a burning or itching sensation accompanied by a rash that is often symmetrical in pattern. While people who live in warmer climates are at a higher risk for dyshidrotic eczema, contrary to popular belief, it is not related to sweat. Its actual cause is unknown but it has often been linked to skin contact with metals or jewelry containing nickel.

Nummular Eczema

Nummular eczema usually affects the lower leg and is also known as 'discoïd' dermatitis due to its appearance in circular patches. It can last for weeks or even months and then disappear of its own accord. The brown, red or pink circular patches have a dry, cracked surface, are bumpy, blistered or crusted and extremely itchy. Nummular eczema is not hereditary or allergenic.

Eczema Herpeticum

Eczema herpeticum can occur when a person with pre-existing eczema has skin-to-skin contact with someone who has the herpes simplex virus. While routine herpes simplex virus usually revolves around cold sores near the mouth, when it comes in contact with areas of pre-existing eczema it can spread throughout the entire surface of the skin using the existing eczema as a base. The eczema herpeticum rash is characterized by small skin blisters filled with yellow pus that appear on top of the usual eczema rash. It is accompanied by high fever and general flu-like symptoms. Unlike other forms of eczema, herpeticum eczema can be fatal, eventually infecting the eyes, lungs, kidneys and other organs. Medical assistance must be obtained immediately for early treatment.

Common Skin Condition

Overall, eczema is the most common skin condition in the world with a 20% spike in growth rate among children in only the past few decades. This might be attributed to more and more chemicals and other allergens in our environment. Eczema afflicts men and women equally and impacts all races and ages. One out of every 12 adults and one out of every 5 children have eczema. [Many children develop infant eczema, before they are 1 year of age. For about half of them it disappears by the time they are 5 years old, but the other 50% continue to experience signs and symptoms into adulthood, often the form of hand eczema.

Cause of Eczema

With the exact cause of eczema unknown, the cure is also a mystery. Fortunately, eczema can be managed with proper treatment and by discovering and handling the things that make it worse. Your chosen medical practitioner can work with you to arrive at a successful method of treatment for your particular type of eczema. Treatments could include anything from prescribed steroids, UV light treatments, antihistamines, or even aromatherapy, homeopathy or acupuncture. Soothing eczema creams are the most popular method of relief. Most often, a uniquely-tailored mix of treatments brings about the greatest success in relieving the symptoms of eczema.