



Eczema: Managing Chronic Skin Inflammation and Itching

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DESCRIPTION

Eczema is also known as atopic dermatitis is a chronic inflammatory skin condition characterized by red, itchy and swollen patches of skin. It affects millions of people worldwide, including children and adults, and can significantly impact quality of life due to its persistent symptoms and its association with other conditions like asthma and hay fever. Managing eczema effectively requires a comprehensive approach that includes understanding the condition, implementing strategies to reduce symptoms and adopting lifestyle changes. Eczema is a multifactorial condition with a complex interaction of genetic, environmental, and immune system factors. The exact cause of eczema remains unclear, but it is believed to involve a combination of genetic predisposition and environmental triggers. Individuals with eczema often have a family history of allergic conditions, indicating a genetic component. In those with eczema, the skin barrier function is compromised, allowing irritants and allergens to penetrate more easily, which triggers inflammation and itching.

The condition is typically characterized by dry, red and inflamed skin. It can occur anywhere on the body but is most commonly found on the hands, feet, elbows, knees and face. The itching associated with eczema can be intense and persistent; leading to scratching that further damages the skin and exacerbates the condition. Managing eczema involves a combination of medical treatments and lifestyle modifications aimed at reducing inflammation, relieving itching.

One of the treatments for eczema is regular and effective moisturization. Keeping the skin hydrated helps restore the skin barrier function and reduces dryness. Emollients such as creams, ointments, and lotions should be applied immediately after bathing while the skin is still damp to lock in moisture. Thick, oil-based moisturizers are often recommended over water-based products because they provide a more substantial barrier against irritants.

Topical corticosteroids are commonly prescribed to reduce inflammation and relieve itching during eczema flare-ups. These medications work by suppressing the immune response in the affected area. They are available in various strengths, from mild to potent and should be used according to a healthcare provider's instructions to minimize potential side effects, such as thinning of the skin. For sensitive areas where topical corticosteroids may not be appropriate, such as the face or groin, topical calcineurin inhibitors (e.g., tacrolimus and pimecrolimus) can be used. These medications work by modulating the immune response and reducing inflammation without the risk of skin thinning. Oral antihistamines can be helpful in managing severe itching, especially if it interferes with sleep. They work by blocking histamine, a chemical released during allergic reactions that contributes to itching and inflammation. Wet wrap therapy involves applying moisturizers or medications to the skin and then covering the area with damp bandages or clothing. This method helps hydrate the skin, enhance the absorption of topical treatments, and reduce itching and inflammation. Wet wraps are typically used for short periods and under medical supervision to avoid potential complications.

Identifying potential triggers is an important aspect of managing eczema. Common triggers include allergens (e.g., pet dander, pollen), irritants (e.g., harsh soaps, detergents) and environmental factors (e.g., extreme temperatures, low humidity). Keeping a symptom diary can help identify specific triggers and develop strategies to avoid them. For example, using fragrance-free, gentle skin care products and maintaining a stable home environment can reduce exposure to irritants. Collaboration with healthcare providers and personalized treatment plans are essential for achieving optimal outcomes. As research continues to advance, new therapies and strategies may further increase the management of eczema and provide relief for those affected by this challenging condition.

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