

Eczema Fact Sheet

What is Eczema?

Eczema, also known as dermatitis, is a chronic inflammatory skin condition characterized by dry skin with very itchy red patches that may ooze, become scaly, crusted or hardened. Eczema can affect any part of the body and anywhere from 10 to 20% of the Canadian population is affected. The most common type of eczema is atopic dermatitis, and the onset is generally in children before two years of age. Another important type of eczema, which usually occurs on the hands of adults, is contact dermatitis, and is either triggered by an allergenic substance, or from recurrent exposure to substances that chemically harm the skin (soaps, dyes, etc.).

Causes and Triggers

Although genetic, immunological and environmental factors play a key role, the specific cause of eczema is not known. While normal skin is supple, fairly waterproof, and offers protection from the outside world, skin that is affected by eczema is usually dry, cracked, and the protective outer layer (also known as the skin barrier) is damaged. Because of this, the skin loses moisture, resulting in dry, cracked skin.

Eczema symptoms tend to come and go. Reappearing or worsening symptoms are known as a "flare-up." Many factors may trigger an eczema flare-up; these can include soaps, detergents, abrasive clothing, perfume, dust, excessive sweating or low humidity. Irritated skin itches, which causes you to scratch the affected area. Scratching worsens the condition and skin becomes inflamed, worsening the itch. This is called the "itch-scratch cycle," which can become severe and cause pain.

Treating Eczema

While no cure has yet to be found for eczema, and no treatment successfully works for everyone, there are ways to manage eczema to make it more tolerable including: frequent bathing and moisturizer application, as well as the use of OTC creams designed for eczema such as Dermakalm.

