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PATIENT INFORMATION SERIES

10. A PARENT'S GUIDE TO CHILDHOOD ATOPIC DERMATITIS (ECZEMA)

1. What is atopic dermatitis? Atopic dermatitis (AD) is one of the most common skin disorders of infancy and childhood. Early lesions can be intensely itchy, look very red and often are oozing or moist. Older lesions just look like irritated skin and can be very dry. The skin will often thicken from chronic rubbing and scratching. The location of AD varies with age. It can involve the wrists, hands, feet ankles and creases of the elbows and knees. In severe cases, it can be generalized. Whatever the age, the skin will be more susceptible to viral and bacterial infections. Since the skin needs to be intact to hold in water, eczematous skin will always dry out quickly. Patients with AD have difficulty regulating their body temperature and sweating is often irritating and can trigger itching and scratching.

2. What causes atopic dermatitis? The cause of AD is unknown. Allergies to foods and environmental sensitivities simply exacerbate it.

3. Treatment of atopic dermatitis The primary aim of all therapy for AD is to re-hydrate the skin. Eczematous skin is dry and dry skin is itchy. Rubbed and scratched skin develops more eczema. The cycle is broken with aggressive lubrication. The skin is dry because it lacks water not oils, don't avoid bathing. Bath frequently but apply moisturizers within 3 minutes of finishing the bath.

4. Bathing Use lukewarm water (85°F.). Hot water makes you itch. If the skin is open or broken and the water burns, add 1/2 cup of table salt to the water. Don't add bath oil or Aveeno. It makes the tub slippery and dangerous and interferes with water getting into the skin.

The bath can be long and leisurely (20-30 minutes is OK). Use soap and shampoo last so the child doesn't soak in soapy water for an extended time. Use medicated shampoo and leave it on for five minutes if the scalp is affected. Use mild soap like Dove, Tone or Cetaphil only. Pat dry with a soft towel after the bath.

5. Application of creams and ointments Remember to apply creams, ointments and lubricants within three minutes of the bath to help retain the moisture and prevent evaporation. When applying lubricants, apply heavily. Encourage your child to help. Medicated ointments and creams are applied twice per day underneath the Vaseline or other lubricants. Use the stronger topical steroid (usually *Triamcinalone* or *Cutivate*) to the body and the weaker cortisone (usually *Hydrocortisone* or *Desowen*) to the face if it is affected and then apply the thickest moisturizer you can tolerate on top of that. Dress children in soft cotton clothing that covers as much of the skin as possible.

6. More Cotton gloves and mittens are helpful for infants to prevent scratching. Keep nails short and filed smooth. Clothes made from polyester or wool can make some children itchy.