

What is atopic dermatitis or eczema?

Atopic dermatitis or atopic eczema is skin inflammation (rash) that seems to occur in families or people with allergies. The rash is itchy and can occur on any part of the body, even in the lining of the nose and lungs. It is most common in childhood but can occur at any age.

What causes atopic dermatitis or eczema?

Why atopic dermatitis happens is not clear. It tends to run in families and it may be caused by allergies. People with asthma, hay fever or hives often have atopic dermatitis. Foods, dust mites, or animals may sometimes contribute to atopic dermatitis. Stress can also make the rash worse, as well as extreme hot or cold temperatures.

How do you know if you have atopic dermatitis or eczema?

Health care providers can usually determine whether or not you have atopic dermatitis by taking your family history, your personal history and looking at your skin. Sometimes skin tests are used. Babies with atopic dermatitis have red, glazed blotches oozing with a clear fluid. The rash can appear anywhere on the baby's body. When this fluid dries, scabs form. The rash will be itchy, so babies may be restless or fussy. The rash may appear on the face or other parts of the body. As a person gets older, the rash seems to shrink and is limited to only certain parts of the body like the elbows, knees, and back of the hands and feet, neck, face and eyelids. The rash is usually dry, itchy, thick and rough, but can also be oozy.

What is the treatment?

Your health care provider can give you topical steroids to rub on the skin; however, there is no cure. Sometimes cool compresses or moisturizers help. Avoid scratching; this may cause infection. Certain medicines you take by mouth, like antihistamines, may help stop the itching. In extreme cases, your health care provider may give you antibiotics or oral steroids (steroids taken by mouth).

Can outbreaks be controlled or prevented?

Certain situations may cause a rash or worsen it, so follow these helpful tips:

- Follow your health care provider's instructions.
- Practice good general hygiene.
- Avoid situations or substances that may cause an allergic reaction such as perfumes, dust, scratchy clothing, etc.
- Do not bathe more than once a day and do not use hot water. Use as little soap as possible. Choose a mild soap such as Dove.
- Keep the temperature and humidity in your home constant.
- Don't scratch the rash. Keep children's fingernails short.
- Use medicine according to your doctor's instructions.
- Cut the labels out of the neck of shirts.

For more information contact the Guilford County Department of Public Health at 641-7777 or www.guilfordhealth.org