

Eczema Bathing & Moisturizing Guide

Eczema Education Series



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Introduction to Eczema

What is Eczema?

Eczema, also called dermatitis, is a type of recurring skin inflammation that causes sensitive, dry, itchy skin that may become damaged, creating red, raised patches. Atopic dermatitis is genetic and the most common type of eczema. An estimated 15-20% of Canadians will suffer with eczema at some time in their lives. Atopic dermatitis usually starts in infancy, however, it can start well into adulthood. People with atopic dermatitis often have other atopic conditions, such as asthma or hay fever.

There is no cure for eczema; however, you can manage the condition with daily skin care which includes hydrating the skin with regular bathing and applying a non-irritating moisturizer several times daily.



The Dry Skin of Eczema

The dry skin of eczema is not caused by a lack of oil in the skin, but because the skin barrier is damaged, so that the skin cannot retain water. This is why a skin regimen focused on bathing and moisturizing is your first defence against eczema flare-ups.

Temperature extremes, low humidity, wind and excessive washing of the skin, without the use of a follow-up moisturizer, can aggravate eczema. Environmental factors, such as using harsh cleansers, certain perfumes and colognes can also worsen the condition.

The Itch-Scratch Cycle

When the skin becomes irritated, it itches, causing the sufferer to scratch the affected area. Scratching makes the condition worse and the skin becomes inflamed and reddened, creating an itch that does not stop. This is called the “itch-scratch cycle” and can become so severe that it can be painful.



Some doctors describe this as the mystery of eczema - is it the rash that itches, or the itch that rashes?

How to Care for Your Skin

Skin care for people with eczema emphasises hydration! This means putting moisture back into the skin.

The Triangle of Control



The Three Main Strategies to Achieve Control in Eczema are:

1: Hydrating the Skin - Bathing and Moisturizing

Bathing allows moisture to enter the skin. Coating the skin after every bath or shower, with an emollient (moisturizer) helps to seal that moisture in the skin. This is necessary in patients with eczema as their natural skin barrier, which would normally trap moisture in the skin, doesn't work well. This leaves the skin dry, rough and sensitive to irritants.

It is a common myth that drinking an adequate amount of water during the day will hydrate the skin. It is in fact the bathing and moisturizing technique that hydrates the skin. Decades ago, doctors often recommended that eczema sufferers limit baths and showers; however, experts now recommend bathing as an important part of controlling eczema.

After bathing, gently pat the skin dry, and then immediately apply your moisturizer to skin that is still damp. Apply prescription products, as recommended by your physician.

Apply a moisturizer several times throughout the day. Moist skin will reduce itchiness, which in turn helps to control the disease, as flares occur or increase in response to itching.

Frequent bathing (even 2 to 3 times daily) followed by a moisturizer should be your first defence in managing your eczema!

2: Medical Management

Medical management is an important part of controlling eczema, and medications (including topical creams and ointments) should be used as prescribed by your physician. Do not discontinue, or alter the treatment plan without consulting your physician. Speak to your physician or your child's physician about the best treatment option for the individual.

Medical management includes anti-inflammatory topical treatments, antibiotics, and antihistamines.

Anti-inflammatory topical treatments:

- **Topical Corticosteroids** are prescribed to reduce inflammation and itching. Strengths range from mild to very strong. When used under the direction of a physician, topical corticosteroids are very effective and safe. In fearing side effects, eczema sufferers or their care givers, often use the treatment too sparingly, or too infrequently. Possible side effects include thinning of the skin if preparations are used excessively or for extended periods. Follow your physician's recommendations exactly, and address any questions or concerns you have with your physician.
- **Topical Immunomodulators (e.g. Elidel®, Protopic®)** are prescribed for inflammation and itching, and can be used for short, intermittent periods of time unless otherwise directed by your physician. Possible side effects are mild to moderate burning sensation. These treatments are not recommended for children under the age of 2.

Oral Steroids:

- **Oral corticosteroids (e.g. Prednisone®)** are rarely used, and reserved for the most severe cases. There are long-term side effects with prolonged use, and because eczema is a chronic condition, this is not a permanent solution for severe chronic eczema.

Antibiotics:


- Topical Antibiotics are prescribed for secondary infection, which can worsen the eczema and may make it more difficult for the eczema to respond to treatment until the bacterial infection has been cleared. Localized patches of infected or resistant eczema may be treated by topical antibiotic creams and ointments. Mupirocin (e.g. *Bactroban*®) or Fucidic Acid (e.g. *Fucidin* ointment®) have shown to be beneficial.
- **Combination Topical Treatments (e.g. Fucidin H®)** combine *Fucidin*® with a mild hydrocortisone, which helps to both reduce inflammation and clear the secondary infection with one application.
- **Oral (taken by mouth) Antibiotics** are prescribed for more significant skin infections. There is often secondary infection on eczema patches, even when there may be no other obvious signs of infection. Oral antibiotics are preferred over topical antibiotics when the infection is extensive.

Antihistamines:

- **Antihistamines** are used to relieve itching and aid in sleep. Itching tends to increase at night (daytime distraction also helps reduce daytime itching). As you increase hydration of the skin (through bathing and regular moisturizing) and manage your eczema, you will decrease the need for antihistamines, as night time itching decreases when the skin is moist and healthy. Use of antihistamines for children 6 years of age and under should be discussed with his/her physician.

3: Education

- Understanding the disease will help to control it! The condition can be managed by learning about the disease and the ways to control it.
- Avoidance of Triggers. Avoiding common triggers such as harsh soaps, fragrances and perfumes, and certain foods, may help to reduce your flares. Use our Trigger chart to better understand your triggers.
- Seek support! Talking with others who understand what you are going through is very important. Eczema exists as a spectrum, meaning that there are patients with very mild conditions, and then there are those with moderate and severe conditions that have significant physical and psychological impacts. Often the impact of eczema is minimized by those who are not suffering with the condition. Contact us for information about support in your area. Eczema sufferers can visit www.eczemahelp.ca for more information on support in your area. They may also call (905) 535-0776 or e-mail: director@eczemahelp.ca for personal support. We are here to help!
- Eczema impacts quality of life for the sufferer and their whole family. Social interactions, relationships, work, family, comfort, and self image can all be negatively affected when eczema is not well controlled.



**It is important
to follow all
three parts to
maximize
effectiveness!**

Bathing

The Bathing Regimen

The Bathing Regimen should be followed diligently during a flare-up, and after a flare-up as preventative maintenance. Bathing can be cut back to once per day when the skin is smooth, soft, and properly hydrated. You should continue to moisturize the skin several times daily, even when the skin is healthy.

Bathing – Step by Step

Follow these bathing steps to hydrate the skin, at least once a day, and up to three times a day when the skin is flared.

What you will need:

- **a bath tub or bathing basin for babies or toddlers**
- **an emulsifying oil (optional)**
- **a gentle cleanser**
- **a moisturizer**
- **prescription treatments, if necessary**
- **a timer, watch or clock**
- **a soft natural fibre towel**



Steps to Bathing the Eczema Sufferer:

1. Fill the bath with lukewarm water (add emulsifying oil, oatmeal bath, etc, at this time).
2. Immerse the patient in the water, trying to cover as much of the body as possible.
3. Do not immerse the head in water. If eczema is on the face, or areas of the body not soaking in the water, gently apply a soft wash cloth soaked in the water/oil mixture to those areas.
4. Have the patient soak in the water/oil for at least five minutes, but not more than 20 minutes. Try to make this fun for children by using safe bath toys.
5. Clean areas of the body that need additional cleaning with your gentle cleanser.
6. The bather will be slippery, so take extra care when getting out of the bath, to avoid injury. Take extra care when handling infants and children.
7. When coming out of the bath, try to leave as much water on the skin as possible. Gently dry off excess water with a soft towel, or briefly air dry if the air is warm. If your medicated treatment is corticosteroids, apply now to the still damp skin. For the non-cortisone based prescriptions, such as *Elidel* or *Protopic* ensure the skin is completely dry before applying.
8. Apply prescription products to flared areas, carefully avoiding healthy skin.
9. Apply your moisturizer to the remaining patches of healthy skin. The entire body can and should be moisturized between bathing with your regular, non-prescription moisturizer.

Guide to Moisturizers, Cleansers, and Bath Products

How do I select the best bathing and moisturizing products?

The best products for bathing and moisturizing are:

1. Products that have few ingredients and that are formulated for sensitive skin and eczema. You want thick moisturizers that will both moisturize the skin, and provide a barrier.
2. Products that fit your budget. More expensive is not necessarily better.
3. Products that the eczema sufferer will tolerate and will actually use! If you or your child dislikes the greasy feeling of petrolatum, then find a moisturizer that works for you!



Types of Baths

Clear Water Bath or Shower: All you really need is fresh clear water, a non-irritating cleanser, and a moisturizer. See our Bathing Regimen for more information.

Bleach Baths: Your doctor may recommend taking bleach baths if there is a bacterial infection on the skin. Speak to your doctor about how to safely and effectively use bleach baths, and carefully follow your doctor's instructions.

Vinegar Baths: These have a similar benefit to bleach baths; however, we do not recommend that you undergo this type of treatment without consulting your doctor. Vinegar baths can also sting open wounds.

Bath Oil (Emulsifying Oils) Baths: Emulsifying oils in the bath help to increase hydration of the skin. Use oils in the bath if you find them to be helpful. Be careful to avoid injury from slipping as you, or your child will be slippery!

Salt Baths: When there is a significant flare the bath water may sting or be uncomfortable.

Baking Soda Baths: Added to a bath or made into a paste it can be used to relieve the itching.

Oatmeal baths: Oatmeal can be added to a bath to relieve the itching. Oatmeal can be wrapped in cheese cloth and held under the running water. You can also purchase bath products that contain oatmeal, which you may find helpful.

The Importance of Bathing & Moisturizing

Moisturizing helps to:

- heal skin damaged by itching
- decrease itchiness, as dry skin increases itch
- increase hydration in the skin
- provide a barrier to the skin¹
- improve the barrier function of eczema sufferers²

Bathing helps to:

- provide moisture to the skin which the moisturizer will then help to seal in
- increase hydration of the skin if an emulsifying oil is added to the bath water, as the skin will actually absorb some of the water and oil

1. Weinstein, Miriam. Non-Pharmacological Management of Atopic Dermatitis. *Skin Therapy Letter – Family Practice Edition* V5 (1):4-7 (2009 Apr).

2. Buraczewska I, et al. Changes in skin barrier function following long-term treatment with moisturizers, a randomized controlled study. *BR J Dermatol* 156(3):492-8 (2007 Mar).

How to Apply a Moisturizer:

1. With clean hands, take your ointment or cream, and soften it by rubbing it between your hands.
2. Apply the softened product to your skin using the palms of your hands, using downward strokes.
3. Do not rub the skin vigorously – this can increase irritation.
4. Leave a thin film of moisturizer sitting on your skin surface.
5. Repeat this process several times daily, especially when your skin feels dry and/or itchy, and after contact with water, such as hand washing, bathing, showering, or swimming.

Remember that everyone prefers and tolerates a different product! There is no one product that is best for people with eczema. Look for a moisturizer that is thick, and has few ingredients. Products specifically formulated for people with eczema may be good choices.



Beneficial Ingredients in Moisturizers

Aloe Vera

- Aloe Vera can be a helpful ingredient for eczema as its applications include use as an anti-inflammatory, anti-itch, and wound healing³.

Ceramides

- Ceramides are lipid molecules that are components of a healthy skin structure, and these molecules are lacking in the skin of atopic dermatitis sufferers. Using a moisturizer with ceramides improves the skin barrier, and helps prevent further water loss from the skin. Moisturizers with ceramides are helpful in not only moisturizing the skin, but in improving the skin barrier¹.

Colloidal Oatmeal

- It has multiple active components that may help to reduce inflammation and itch
- It is one of the few natural ingredients approved as a skin protectant by the US FDA⁴
- Colloidal oatmeal can be found in certain moisturizers and body washes.

Petrolatum

- A greasy moisturizer on its own, or may be an ingredient in a white moisturizer.
- Petrolatum is generally non-irritating, and provides a barrier to the skin.
- Excellent moisturizing properties.

3. Wu J. Anti-inflammatory ingredients. *J Drugs Dermatol* 7 (7Suppl):s13-6 (2008 Jul).

Water can increase dryness of your skin if you do not moisturize your skin following every contact with water, such as bathing, showering, swimming, etc. A moisturizer must be applied within three minutes of any contact with water.

A person is sitting on a large blue exercise ball in a grassy field. The background is filled with green trees and foliage, suggesting an outdoor setting. The person's hands are visible, resting on their lap. The overall scene is bright and natural.

We are here to help!

Contact us for information about support in your area. Eczema sufferers can visit www.eczema-help.ca for more information on support in your area.



About the Eczema Society

The Eczema Society of Canada is a registered Canadian charity dedicated to eczema education, support, awareness, and research.



For additional information or to order treatment guides contact:

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The medical content within this guide is based on current treatment recommendations by experts in eczema treatment, however, the information contained within should never be used as an exclusive treatment course.

Always review your treatment with your own physician.

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