

Eczema

Eczema is an itchy inflammation of the skin that causes it to become dry, red and thicker in some places. During a flare-up, the skin can start weeping, forming crusts, lumps or blisters. Patches of eczema are normally found on the face and hands, and inside the elbows and knees, although it can occur anywhere on the body.

Eczema tends to run in families who have a history of allergies or other allergic conditions, such as asthma. Symptoms can be triggered by an allergic reaction, where the immune system overreacts to something found in our food or the environment.

Around 10 to 20 per cent of children and three to five per cent of adults currently suffer from eczema. This number is rising, although experts are still divided over the reasons for the increase. Unfortunately, there is still no cure for eczema, but there are a number of natural ways you can control the condition and help alleviate the symptoms.

Supplement help:

Research suggests people who have eczema don't process essential fatty acids from food normally, leading to low levels of a fatty acid called gamma-linoleic acid (GLA). This helps your immune system work properly, so taking a supplement could help reduce the skin inflammation associated with eczema. It can take around three months for GLA to have an effect on the body once you start taking supplements. Evening Primrose Oil, Starflower Oil and Blackcurrant Seed Oil:

These three oils all contain GLA. A number of studies have found that taking these oils could not only reduce the number of eczema flare-ups, but also how severe they are and the length of time they last. An analysis of nine scientific trials found GLA was particularly helpful at reducing itching. Fish Oils:

Fish oils may also help eczema because they reduce levels of leukotriene B4, a compound that has been linked to the condition. B Vitamins:

B vitamins may also play a supportive role in managing eczema. Deficiencies in some B vitamins, especially biotin and inositol, have been linked to skin disorders, while other B vitamins are needed to maintain healthy skin and good circulation. Zinc:

Zinc is also vital for healthy skin because it helps with wound healing and plays a central role in maintaining a healthy immune system. Good sources of zinc are meat, shellfish, dairy products, nuts, bread and cereal products. Beneficial Bacteria:

These bacteria can be found in probiotic drinks, some yogurts or a supplement, such as acidophilus, are also thought to reduce the risk of eczema flare-ups. Herbal help:

Several herbs have traditionally been used to relieve the symptoms of eczema. Liquorice Root:

Liquorice root contains a substance called glycyrrhizic acid, which is believed to help reduce the symptoms of eczema. It can be taken internally or applied directly to the skin. Burdock Root:

This root is commonly used as it contains an active ingredient called inulin, which is thought to help rebalance the inflammatory response of the immune system that overreacts in eczema sufferers. Chamomile and Calendula:

Chamomile and calendula have anti-inflammatory properties that can help soothe eczema flare-ups when applied to the skin. Witch Hazel:

Witch hazel, an astringent, can be applied to weeping eczema to encourage healing and prevent infection. Creams containing St John's Wort may also help reduce the length and severity of flare-ups.

Diet and Lifestyle:

A good diet is the key to excellent health, including the health of your skin. Try to eat at least three portions of oily fish, such as herring, mackerel, salmon and sardines, each week as they are rich in skin-calming essential fatty acids (EFA). To boost your EFA intake, try to include a wide range of EFA-rich oils in your diet, such as flaxseed, hemp or walnut oils. They can be used to dress salads or as a substitute for butter on your bread. Pumpkin Seeds:

These seeds are rich in zinc and, along with sunflower seeds, are a good source of anti-inflammatory fats such as ALA (alpha-linoleic acid). Try sprinkling seeds on soups and salads or nibbling them as a healthy snack.

Make sure you drink at least two litres of liquids, such as water, fruit juice or herbal tea, every day to help keep your skin hydrated.

Eczema is often triggered by an allergy. The most common type, atopic eczema, is caused by the immune system overreacting to ordinary substances, such as household dust mites, animal hair or skin, and common bacteria. Getting rid of the allergen – the substance that triggers the reaction – can bring about huge improvements. Try allergy-free bedding to reduce contact with house dust mites, or try avoiding contact with animals to see if it helps.

Another type, contact eczema, is caused by a direct skin reaction to problematic substances, such as biological washing powder or nickel in watches or belt buckles. Simply swapping your washing powder and removing potential irritants can help significantly improve the condition.

Some people find that excluding foods like dairy products, wheat or eggs can help, but only if an allergy to a particular food has been diagnosed.

Stress can be a major trigger for an eczema flare-up making outbreaks longer and more severe. Sufferers should do their best to avoid situations they find stressful and try to find ways to relax. Supplements and herbs mentioned in this article are available to buy online now:

- Evening Primrose Oil
- Fish Oils
- B vitamins
- Zinc