

[Ask The Expert]



By **NEIL ALAN FENSKE, M.D.**
Tribune correspondent

Eczema is a skin disorder characterized by intractable itching, inflammation, scaling and thickening of the skin.

Eczema, asthma and hay fever are genetically related allergic conditions. Patients may be affected by any combination of the disorders, and the severity of each can vary. Although eczema affects patients of all ages, 80 percent to 90 percent develop signs of the condition by age 5.

Some experts think genetically predisposed infants who eventually develop the disease are actually raised in an environment that is too clean. Children from undeveloped countries, for example, are less likely to develop the symptoms given the same genetic risk.

The hypothesis, so far unproven, is that by not exposing the immune system

HANDLE ECZEMA PROBLEMS WITH CARE

to dirt, grime and germs early in life, you prevent proper development of the immune system in susceptible patients.

Eczema's rash results from repetitive rubbing and scratching of skin that intensely itches. Patients become so distressed they often go into a scratching frenzy. The resulting pain actually relieves the itch.

Left in the wake of such episodes is greatly damaged skin. Some areas are chronically inflamed with oozing and crusting, and others become thickened, almost leatherlike in appearance. Overall, the background skin is dry.

Keeping the skin well hydrated with creams is the best way to prevent flare-ups and relieve itching. Be sure the skin is moist before application, and avoid sweating afterward, as it can trigger itching. Avoid irritants, such as solvents, detergents and harsh soaps, as the skin is very sensitive.

Other "triggers" to avoid include changes in temperature, emotional

duress, and known allergens such as pollen, mold, dust mites and animal dander.

Ointments and creams containing corticosteroids applied to inflamed areas are the first line of treatment, but these are limited by their side effects and diminishing effectiveness with prolonged use. New, highly effective

nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs called macrolactams (Elidel, Protopic) are available as short-term therapy in conjunction with steroidal medications.

Dr. Fenske is professor and chairman of the Department of Dermatology and Cutaneous Surgery at USF Health.

