



NATIONAL  
**Eczema**  
ASSOCIATION

# ECZEMA: TOOLS *for* SCHOOL



ECZEMA TOOLS FOR SCHOOL: AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE



# INTRO

This booklet offers educators basic information on the causes of eczema, describes the social, emotional, and physical consequences of eczema for children and their families, and suggests ways educators can raise awareness and help foster a positive experience for students with eczema.





## DEAR EDUCATOR,

Today, more than one million school-age children in the United States are suffering from severe eczema (also known as atopic dermatitis). Eczema is a chronic disease that causes itchy, inflamed skin. Although eczema is not contagious, symptoms like scaling, rashes, and open sores can cause social and emotional issues that make life even more difficult for young children already dealing with a challenging disease.

The National Eczema Association has developed *Eczema: Tools for School* to help parents, educators, and students learn more about eczema. By working together, we can raise awareness, increase understanding, and give children with eczema a happy, healthy school experience.

*Eczema: Tools for School* includes comprehensive guides for parents and educators, a series of fact pages covering everything from background information on eczema to strategies for managing eczema in the classroom.

We encourage you to distribute these materials to your fellow educators, students and their parents to raise awareness and understanding of eczema. By doing this, you will help make school a better place for children with eczema.

Please feel free to contact us directly by phone, mail or email if you have questions, suggestions, or if we can help you in any way.

Sincerely,

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# ECZEMA

Eczema is an umbrella term for different types of dermatitis (skin conditions characterized by itching and rash). The most severe and long-lasting type of eczema is atopic dermatitis (AD). It is this type of eczema we will discuss here.



allergens (including pollen, pet dander, dust or particular foods), and infections (illnesses like a cold or skin infection).

Dry skin is particularly problematic for children with eczema. People with eczema tend to have very dry skin that is vulnerable to itching and rash. Moisturizing frequently is important to keep skin healthy and supple.

Stress is a less visible but still important trigger. Both symptoms and treatment of eczema can be stressful, as can the social and emotional consequences of the condition — things like social isolation or teasing. Children, especially when young, cannot always identify stressors, so it is crucial for parents and teachers to be aware of possible stressful conditions and find ways to help children cope.

## WHO SUFFERS FROM ECZEMA?

Eczema nearly always begins early in life — 90% of cases occur before the age of five. Itching and rash most often appear inside the elbows, behind the knees, and on the face, but can affect almost any part of the body. Although it may taper off with age, most people have eczema for life. Today, about 30 million Americans, 1 million of them school-age children, are living with eczema.

## ECZEMA: CAUSES AND TRIGGERS

Eczema falls into a category of atopic diseases, a term originally used to describe the allergic conditions: asthma and hay fever. Eczema is included in the atopic category because it often affects people who suffer from asthma and/or hay fever or have family members who do. The exact cause is unknown, but it tends to run in families, and can be triggered by many factors.

Triggers vary from one person to the next. Common triggers include dry skin, heat, sweating, irritants (substances that make skin red, itchy, or dry),

“I’m itchy all the time.”



## THE “ITCH-SCRATCH CYCLE”

One of the worst things about eczema is the “itch-scratch” cycle. For people with eczema, scratching makes things worse. Instead of relieving the itch, scratching intensifies the redness and swelling and activates nerve fibers, triggering more itching, which in turn leads to more scratching.

## FLARE-UPS

As with many other allergic conditions, eczema flares up and disappears. Relatively symptom-free periods alternate with others where symptoms flare up. Flare-ups may be seasonal, triggered by factors like irritants, allergens, or stress, or have no identifiable cause.

## PHYSICAL, SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF ECZEMA

The physical effects of eczema are evident: dry, itchy skin and rash. During flare-ups, symptoms worsen and sores may appear. Sometimes skin becomes infected, developing a yellow crust or bumps that contain pus. Constant scratching is a common physical component of eczema and readily apparent.

Emotional effects may be less obvious. It can be difficult to understand the torment of an unbearable

itch for which scratching provides only momentary relief. Scratching often exacerbates the discomfort and pain (children with eczema often scratch until they bleed). Eczema can be compared to a bully who sometimes keeps going for days on end, then leaves, only to reappear.

Socially, children with eczema may suffer most simply by being different. At an age when their peers are learning the basic skills of social interaction, children with eczema are singled out because of symptoms like visibly dry, red, rough skin, or scratching. Worse, particular triggers may limit important activities such as sports (since sweating can exacerbate eczema) or arts and crafts (where materials used may act as irritants).

Children with eczema must also cope with a lack of understanding from other children, an unfounded fear of contagion by both children and adults, teasing, and isolation.

## THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT ECZEMA

While living with eczema may be a challenge, especially for children, it does not have to be an experience of constant suffering. With proper medical treatment and support from family, friends, and important adults like teachers, most children with eczema can live normal lives.



# HOW YOU CAN RAISE AWARENESS ABOUT ECZEMA



“My teachers don’t know I have eczema and that makes me feel alone.”

Broadly speaking, there are three things you can do:

## **Become well informed.**

Learn everything you can about eczema — the tools that come with this kit are a good place to start.

To learn more, you can visit the National Eczema Association website: [nationaleczema.org](http://nationaleczema.org)

## **Spread the word.**

Whenever and wherever possible, raise awareness about eczema. Talk to your students, parents, and other educators about the disease.

## YOUR TOOLS

In addition to the Educator’s Guide, *Eczema: Tools for School* includes the following elements:

- ✓ **ECZEMA BASICS (fact page)** provides an overview of eczema and eczema treatments for teachers, parents, and anyone else interested in learning about eczema.
- ✓ **HELP MANAGE ECZEMA IN THE CLASSROOM (fact page)** identifies common triggers and suggests ways teachers can manage eczema in the classroom.
- ✓ **TALKING TO PARENTS ABOUT ECZEMA (work page)** helps teachers speak to parents about helping children with eczema cope in the classroom — and serves as a resource in supporting their students with eczema.
- ✓ **HELP STUDENTS UNDERSTAND ECZEMA (fact pages)** presents information that can serve as an outline for a classroom lesson on eczema or be used as a resource to explain eczema as the subject arises in the classroom.

## **Take action.**

Use the tools in *Eczema: Tools for School* to help your students with eczema have a positive school experience. Hand out fact pages to fellow educators and parents (whether or not their children have eczema). Encourage teachers to hold eczema workshops in the classroom. Organize an “Eczema Awareness Day” for your school. The possibilities are limitless!



## ECZEMA BASICS

An overview of eczema and treatments for teachers, parents, and anyone interested in learning about eczema.

### Basic Eczema facts

- Eczema is an umbrella term for different types of dermatitis (skin conditions characterized by itching and rash).
- The most severe and long-lasting type of eczema is atopic dermatitis (AD), which usually starts in early childhood.
- Symptoms include dry skin, itching, rash, and sometimes crusting and sores.
- Eczema tends to come and go; periods of severe symptoms are called “flare-ups.”
- Eczema is not contagious; it is a skin disease that tends to run in families and can be triggered by seasonal changes, environmental irritants, and allergens like dust or foods.
- While there is no cure for eczema, it can be managed.

### Treatments for Eczema

- Emollients (moisturizers) keep dry skin moisturized and help reduce itching. If your classroom has one or more children with eczema, ask their parents to provide a jar of emollient or cream to be applied during the school day. If a jar of cream is utilized, make sure a plastic spoon, scoop, or other tool is used to get the cream, rather than fingers or hands that can contaminate the product (fingers should never go directly into a jar).
- Antihistamines are medications children may take at night to reduce itching and encourage sleep. If students with eczema are drowsy during the day, antihistamines may be the reason.
- Antibiotics are sometimes needed to control skin infections. If children need to take antibiotics during school, be sure to ask parents to provide detailed, written instructions on taking them (when to take the medication, with or without food).
- Bandages are sometimes necessary to protect skin when eczema is particularly severe, such as when skin is infected. Ask parents for advice on keeping bandages tidy.



# HELP MANAGE ECZEMA IN THE CLASSROOM

School is a challenging environment for children with eczema — and their teachers. An ordinary classroom is filled with possible triggers that can aggravate eczema symptoms, making everyday activities like recess or arts and crafts more difficult.

## TRIGGERS: A CHECKLIST

The following things can worsen eczema symptoms, and should be avoided as much as possible:

- **Irritants:** woolen clothing, carpets, plastic chairs, many ordinary soaps, laundry powders, chemicals and metals.
- **Allergens:** pollen, dust, pet dander, some foods (such as eggs, milk, peanuts, citrus fruit), food coloring, and preservatives.
- **Temperature extremes:** cold or hot weather — children should sit away from windows and radiators.
- **Sweating:** avoid sweating if possible.
- **Stress:** whether caused by worry over school, physical discomfort, or social problems, stress can exacerbate eczema.
- **Ingredients in lotions and creams:** some moisturizers may contain chemicals or perfumes that are eczema triggers. Discuss with parents what moisturizers can be used, and which should be avoided.

## CLOTHING AND DIET

- **Cotton clothing is best for children with eczema;** uniform policies should be flexible.
- **Diet:** sometimes certain foods can trigger eczema; talk to parents about what foods to avoid. As children tend to share food, you will need to be alert to prevent a child from eating trigger foods. It may be necessary to explain to the class that a student cannot eat a specific food because it will make eczema worse.

## SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

- **Arts and crafts:** cotton or cotton-lined rubber gloves can help minimize contact with irritants like paint, glue, chemicals, and metals.
- **Physical activity (gym class, recess):** wearing cotton may help with sweating during exertion, while applying an emollient (moisturizer) before and after swimming can keep skin from drying out.
- **School trips and outings:** take extra care when organizing anything outside the usual routine — discuss upcoming events with parents and plan ahead to avoid triggering flares.

## HOW TO DEAL WITH SCRATCHING

Children with eczema often won't be able to resist scratching because the itching is so intense. Some tips:

- **Avoid telling children not to scratch** — encourage rubbing or pinching instead, which may bring some relief without damaging the skin.
- **Applying an emollient (moisturizer) or a cool washcloth** to the itchy area or drinking a glass of cold water may provide some relief.
- **If itching is particularly bad,** make arrangements to have the child leave the room until things calm down.
- **Understanding and sympathy** can minimize emotional distress.
- **Talk to parents and the child** about ways to cope with itching.
- **Set up a signal and action plan** — for many students it is helpful to have a signal that the teacher can give to them (or they to the teacher) during a particularly itchy period. The teacher can give the agreed upon hand signal to the student which reminds the student that they can take a previously agreed upon action to help bring relief (such as applying moisturizer, going to the school nurses' office for 10 minutes to place a covered ice pack on a particularly itchy spot, or taking another previously agreed upon action to help lessen the itch).



# WORK PAGE FOR TEACHERS

Communication with parents is key to helping students with eczema. The more you know about a particular child's circumstances, the better prepared you will be to make school a positive experience.

A FRAMEWORK FOR DISCUSSION WITH PARENTS, AND A RESOURCE IN HELPING YOU SUPPORT STUDENTS WITH ECZEMA.

CHILD'S NAME	PARENT'S NAME
Eczema medications	Does your child's eczema require regular application of an emollient (moisturizer)?
Is scratching a problem for your child?	What strategies have you found successful in coping with/minimizing scratching?
Do you know of any allergens (dust, pollen, pet dander) that aggravate your child's eczema?	Are there any other aggravating factors that you know of?
Are there any foods that your child should avoid?	Does your child have any limitations on activities because of eczema?
Is your child's sleep affected by eczema? Can this contribute to tardies, absences, or sleepiness in class?	How has eczema affected your child emotionally? Socially?
Has your child previously experienced any problems in school because of eczema?	Do you have any suggestions or insights you would like to share about helping your child cope with eczema at school?
Is there anything else you would like to share that you feel might be helpful?	



# HELP YOUR STUDENTS UNDERSTAND

Knowledge and understanding are key to understanding eczema. Talk to your students about being kind to everyone. Here are some facts that will help your students understand life with eczema



**ECZEMA IS A SKIN DISEASE** that causes itching and rashes.



**ECZEMA IS NOT CONTAGIOUS LIKE A COLD.** You can't catch it. It is like an allergy, like hay fever, except it affects your skin instead of your nose.



**PEOPLE WHO HAVE ECZEMA HAVE VERY DRY SKIN,** which gets itchy. This is why they sometimes scratch, and why they may put on creams and lotions to keep their skin from getting dry.



**ECZEMA CAN COME AND GO.** Sometimes it will get better, other times it will be worse.

**IF YOU HAVE ECZEMA, BE CAUTIOUS OF THE FOLLOWING TRIGGERS, WHICH CAN MAKE YOUR ECZEMA WORSE:**



**Wool clothing**



**Perfumes**



**Heat**



**Glue**



**Cold**



**Paint**



**Pets**



**Carpets**



**Dust**



**Sweating**

Being different is



# LIFE WITH ECZEMA

## TALKING TO STUDENTS ABOUT ECZEMA



THE ITCHING AND RASH ARE UNCOMFORTABLE and sometimes painful, but other people making fun of eczema is what really hurts.

TREAT EVERYONE WITH KINDNESS...it's what's on the inside that counts.

"Eczema reminds me that everyone feels different sometimes."

"My soccer coach is a doctor. He told my teammates I have eczema and that it's no big deal. Since then, I've been more relaxed."

"Eczema makes me feel self conscious and uncomfortable."

"I don't like it when people stare at me because of my skin."

no fun — people with eczema want to be like everyone else. ✎





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