



NATIONAL  
**Eczema**  
ASSOCIATION

# ECZEMA: TOOLS *for* SCHOOL



ECZEMA TOOLS FOR SCHOOL: A PARENT'S GUIDE



# INTRO

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

## NOTE TO PARENTS:

This Guide is part of *Eczema: Tools for School*, a kit designed to help parents and educators give children with eczema the best possible school experience. We encourage you to share this kit with your child's teachers, school staff, and other educators. It's important for all school personnel to be aware of your child's eczema, to avoid speculation about what is happening with your child's skin and to prevent your child's embarrassment by unknowing questions. Share information about eczema with all school staff — including administrators, teachers, school nurses, library staff, physical education staff, bus drivers, etc. (To obtain additional copies of *Eczema: Tools for School*, please contact the National Eczema Association).



## DEAR PARENT,

You and your child are not alone. Did you know that more than one million school-age children in the United States are suffering from severe eczema (also known as atopic dermatitis)? 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.

The elements of *Eczema: Tools for School* can be divided into two parts: *A Parent's Guide* and *An Educator's Guide*.

*A Parent's Guide* includes a comprehensive manual on eczema and a fact page offering tips and suggestions for discussing eczema with your child.

*An Educator's Guide* is an eczema manual for educators. It covers everything from basic eczema facts to strategies for managing eczema in the classroom.

We encourage you to distribute these materials to your child's teacher, school personnel, and other parents at your child's school 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,



Julie Block  
President and Chief Executive Officer  
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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 general type of eczema we will discuss in this kit. Please note that the terms eczema and atopic dermatitis (AD) are used interchangeably. The term eczema is often used to signify AD.

## 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.

“I scratch all night long  
— even in my sleep —  
and I wake up every night!”

## ECZEMA: CAUSES AND TRIGGERS

Eczema falls into a category of atopic diseases, a term originally used to describe the allergic conditions such as 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, perfumes, irritants (substances that make skin red, itchy, or dry), 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.

## THE “ITCH-SCRATCH CYCLE”

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

## FLARE-UPS

As with many other allergic conditions, eczema comes and goes. Relatively symptom-free periods alternate with others where symptoms flare-up (or intensify). 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 flares, 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 is 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.

## IMPACT OF ECZEMA ON THE FAMILY

Whatever affects a child impacts the entire family. Parents shoulder the work of medical visits, time-consuming treatments, and altering the family's living arrangements to manage their child's condition. In some cases, treatment can be a financial burden. Parents must also help children with the social and emotional stresses associated with eczema. Sleep deprivation is a common side effect of eczema for the child and other family members, as the itching and scratching can prevent a good night's sleep. Not surprisingly, parents of children with eczema may become exhausted, or experience feelings of depression, guilt, or anger.

## THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT ECZEMA

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



# HOW YOU CAN RAISE AWARENESS ABOUT ECZEMA

## HOW YOU CAN HELP YOUR CHILD

### Become well informed.

The more you know about eczema, the better you will be able to cope, and the more confident you will feel. Learn everything you can about eczema. One place to learn is on the National Eczema Association website: [nationalezema.org](http://nationalezema.org)

### Talk to your child.

Communication is as important as medical treatment in helping your child cope with eczema. As you learn about eczema, teach your child what you know. It is also important to encourage your child to share with you, particularly when it comes to their feelings, or experiences outside the home and in school.

### Talk to your child's teacher.

A teacher who is educated about eczema is a valuable ally who can help your child cope with both the practical aspects of eczema and social and emotional issues that may arise in the classroom.

"Eczema reminds me that everyone feels different sometimes."

## HOW YOU CAN HELP OTHER CHILDREN

### Spread the word.

Whenever and wherever possible, raise awareness about eczema. Talk to other parents at your school about the disease!

### Get involved.

If you are the parent of a child with eczema, you have probably already worked with teachers to help your child in school. If your child does not have eczema, you can still make school a better place for children who do. Included in this booklet are some suggestions on how to help.



## TALKING TO YOUR CHILD

This section contains suggestions on how to discuss eczema and related matters with your child. It is important for children to understand their condition in their own terms.

Communication is as important as medical treatment

## HOW YOU CAN TAKE ACTION

- Pass out fact sheets to other parents, teachers and educators, whether or not they are directly responsible for children with eczema. Awareness and acceptance is an important part of making school a comfortable place for children living with eczema.
- Encourage teachers to hold eczema discussions in the classroom so that students will understand why some of their classmates scratch, break out in a rash, or can't do some of the things other children can do.
- Hold an Eczema Awareness Day at your child's school to promote awareness, understanding and acceptance among the student body and faculty.



### The importance of communication

The effects of eczema go beyond symptoms like itching and rash to impact every aspect of your child's life. By keeping lines of communication open, you will help your child cope with the many challenges of eczema.

### Teach your child about eczema

As you learn about eczema, share what you know with your child. Learning about eczema will help your child understand the reasons for treatments, dietary measures, and other steps you have to take to manage his/her condition.

## ment in helping your child cope with eczema. ✎

- Start an Eczema Support Group for parents of children with eczema in your school — meet monthly or bi-monthly to share advice and support. Contact the National Eczema Association for more information on organizing a support group.
- Fundraise for the National Eczema Association — hold a garage sale, organize a bake sale, have a wear-a-hat day at school, or suggest a dress-down day at your office.
- Walk for a cure: get involved with the National Eczema Association Itching for a Cure Walk program by attending an Itching for a Cure walk or hosting a Fun Walk in your community.

### Encourage your child to talk

When your child leaves the house to go to school or play with friends, he or she will face challenges particular to eczema. Perhaps a pet will trigger a flare-up, or your child will encounter questions or teasing from other children. Encourage your child to share these experiences and related feelings with you, so that you can help.

### A conversation every day

It helps if you are able to talk to your child about his or her experiences every day. This makes communication a habit, and ensures you will know about challenges (and successes) when they happen.

### Talking about feelings

Children, especially younger children, may sometimes have difficulty putting their emotions into words. Experiment with different approaches, such as drawing pictures or acting events out with their dolls or other toys, to help your child express feelings.



# TALKING TO YOUR CHILD'S TEACHER

It's a good idea to discuss your child's eczema with the teacher at the beginning of the school year. This list provides a starting point with suggestions for the types of information you may need to share with the teacher as well as a suggested list of items your child should bring to school.

To help the teacher make your child's school experience as normal as possible, set up a meeting to discuss your child's eczema and what you have learned about coping. Below are some topics you may wish to cover in your meeting.

## ECZEMA MEDICATIONS

- You may need to meet with the school nurse to discuss medications.
- Topical steroids will not likely be applied in school. Some states may only allow a nurse or the child (under adult supervision) to apply topical steroids. Therefore, if topical steroids need to be applied in school, it is best for the child to apply the medication him- or herself. Check with the school administration about the rules governing application of topical medication. For anyone who applies topical steroids, they must be sure to wash their hands before and after application, as topical steroids can be absorbed through the skin.
- If the teacher will be giving your child oral medication, discuss when the medication should be taken and details such as whether it should be taken with food.

## SCRATCHING

If your child scratches, let the teacher know, and share strategies you have found helpful (for example, applying moisturizer, or allowing a very fidgety child to leave the room for a short period). It is never a good idea to tell a child to "Stop scratching."

## TRIGGERS, IRRITANTS AND ALLERGENS

- You will have learned from experience that certain foods, substances (such as perfumes, glue or chemicals), or allergens (dust, pollen, pet dander) can trigger or exacerbate your child's eczema.
- Give the teacher a written list of these triggers, along with any suggestions you may have
- For example, your child may need to sit away from windows, radiators and heating ducts if heat makes eczema worse. Some children may need a sheet to cover the carpet when sitting on the floor, or something to cover the desk chair.

## ACTIVITIES

- Your child may have to limit certain activities, such as sports, or take special precautions.
- You can suggest alternative activities to the teacher for your child that don't involve sweating, such as: music, art, writing, acting, filmmaking, or computer work.
- For a child with eczema interested in sports, sports reporting may be an alternative to prevent discomfort.



Provide the teacher with tips that allow



“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.”

## SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL ISSUES

- If eczema has affected your child socially or emotionally, share this with the teacher so he or she can help your child adjust to the new classroom.

## SCHOOL PROBLEMS

- Sometimes children with eczema experience problems at school (teasing is one possibility). Talk to the teacher about your child’s experiences and ways to avoid and prevent problems from recurring.

## SLEEP

- Often, children with eczema have disrupted sleep due to discomfort and itching. Explain to the teacher that this is possible and may contribute to tardies, absences, and sleepiness in class.

## 504 PLAN

- In severe cases, a 504 plan may be considered for a student. A 504 plan is a provision of the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which prohibits discrimination based upon disability. A 504 plan can be used to address physical, medical, or learning issues. All schools, school administrators, and teachers must comply with a 504 plan. In developing a 504 plan, parents discuss and map out with the school all of the details regarding a child’s disability. You might talk about which activities your child needs to opt out of or what can be done to help your child to accomplish a certain goal or task (for example, if a child has severe hand eczema, putting a plan in place where a laptop can be utilized for testing when needed instead of pencil and paper). Every 504 plan is unique, as it is based on a particular individual’s needs.

## ECZEMA SCHOOL CARE KIT

You can make eczema less of an issue — and make school easier — by putting together a kit with everything your child may need during the school day. The list below is just a suggestion; feel free to add or remove items to suit your child’s particular needs.

- Gloves** (for handling materials that may irritate skin)
- Moisturizing cream or lotion**
- Antibiotic ointment**
- Mild cleanser** (if your child cannot tolerate hand soap)
- Alcohol-free hand sanitizer**
- Adhesive bandages**
- Gauze pads**
- Spare bandages**
- Protective clothing**
- Written instructions** on medications your child may be taking at school, triggers to avoid, limitations or special precautions on activities such as sports



your child to participate in activities. 



# RECOMMENDED READING & MOVIES

These books focus on raising self-esteem, promoting positive thinking, and encouraging a greater understanding of people who are different. The selection includes books for adults and children.

## **Arnie and the New Kid**

*Author:* Nancy Carlson  
Puffin Books, 1990

## **Be the Star That You Are!**

*Author:* Susan Heyboer O'Keefe  
*Illustrator:* R.W. Alley  
Abbey Press, 2005

## **The Blue Day Book**

*Author:* Bradley Trevor Grieve

## **Boys Know it All: Wise Thoughts and Wacky Ideas from Guys Just Like You**

*Author:* Michelle Roehm & Marianne Monson-Burton

## **A Button in Her Ear**

*Author:* Ada B. Litchfield  
*Illustrator:* Eleanor Mill  
Albert Whitman & Company, 1976

## **Elmer**

*Author:* David McKee Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991

## **Feeling Sad**

*Author:* Joy Berry  
*Illustrator:* Maggie Smith  
Scholastic Inc., 1996

These movies have themes of feeling different for one reason or another, and conclude with triumph over challenges. This is a partial list of films with this theme.

## **Girls Know Best: Advice for Girls from Girls on Just About Everything**

*Author:* Michelle Roehm & Marci Doane

## **How to Raise Your Self-Esteem**

*Author:* Nathaniel Branden

## **I'd Rather Laugh**

*Author:* Linda Richman

## **Just Like Everybody Else**

*Author:* Jim Pierson  
The Standard Publishing Company

## **Life Strategies: Doing What Works, Doing What Matters**

*Author:* Phillip McGraw

## **Making Every Day Count: Daily Readings for Young People on Solving Problems, Setting Goals, and Feeling Good About Yourself**

*Author:* Pamela Espland & Elizabeth Verdick

## **Pulling Your Own Strings: Dynamic Techniques for Dealing with Other People and Living Your Life as You Choose**

*Author:* Wayne Dyer

## **Rosie ... the Imperfect Angel**

*Author:* Sandra Lee Peckinpah, Trisha Moore (Illustrator) Scholars Press, 1991

## **Sassafras**

*Author:* Audrey Penn  
*Illustrator:* Ruth E. Harper  
Child Welfare League of America, 1993

## **The Seat of the Soul**

*Author:* Gary Zukav

## **When Bad Things Happen to Good People**

*Author:* Harold S. Duschner

## **Where the Sidewalk Ends**


*Author:* Shel Silverstein  
HarperCollins, 1974

Akeelah and the Bee (PG)  
August Rush (PG)  
Beauty and the Beast (G)  
Billy Elliot (PG-13)  
Finding Forrester (PG-13)  
Finding Nemo (G)  
Little Man Tate (PG)  
The Mighty (PG-13)  
Searching for Bobby Fischer (PG)  
Shrek (PG)  
Radio (PG)  
Simon Birch (PG)



# TIPS *for* PARENTS, *from* PARENTS

- ✔ Teach your child to accept eczema early in life. Taking a matter-of-fact approach will help your child learn to live with eczema without feeling shame or embarrassment.
- ✔ Ensure your child understands eczema and why treatments are necessary.
- ✔ Explain things in age-appropriate terms. This will provide reassurance and will aid your child with the ability to manage eczema as he or she grows more independent.
- ✔ If your child is angry, upset, or discouraged because of eczema, accept and validate these feelings without dwelling on them, then move on.
- ✔ If your child has trouble dealing with eczema or the emotional and social consequences, don't hesitate to seek counseling. A therapist can help your child articulate feelings and suggest ways to cope.
- ✔ Make sure your child's teachers know how your child behaves during a flare-up. If your child fidgets, becomes anxious, or is easily distracted during a flare-up, these behaviors may be misinterpreted as signs of attention deficit disorder (ADD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).
- ✔ Teasing and social isolation can be problems for children with eczema. If your child is being teased, talk to the other children and their parents (or your child's teacher, if the teasing occurs at school).
- ✔ Send a first aid kit with your child to school containing adhesive bandages, antibiotic ointment, moisturizer, sunscreen, petroleum jelly, gauze pads, and other items your child may need.
- ✔ Get to know the school nurse (if there is one).



"If I didn't have eczema, I might have been one of those people who judged others by their appearance."



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