

A Naturopathic Approach to Eczema

With such a strong focus on the importance of appearance in our society, having a skin condition can be incredibly frustrating and challenging. Eczema is a common skin condition, affecting 8- 25% of people worldwide, compared to 4% in the 1940s. A study on Australian school students found that approximately 16% of students experience eczema. Skin conditions such as eczema, dermatitis, acne and psoriasis are not only annoying and painful, they can greatly affect self confidence.

Your skin is the largest organ of the body and is involved in eliminating toxins, regulating body temperature and protecting the inside of the body from potential invading micro-organisms. Millions of skin cells are shed each day and our skin completely replaces itself approximately every 27 days.

Eczema or Atopic Dermatitis is an inflammatory condition that causes the skin to become dry, red, itchy or scaly. In some cases it can weep, can become easily infected and painful.

There are many things that can cause and aggravate eczema. When treating it you need to look for the causes, but also look at everything that can affect skin health in general. Skin problems are rarely the result of one single factor, and are a reflection of the health of your internal environment.



Food intolerances and allergies are a common cause of eczema, as they set up inflammation from the inside. A 2010 study examined 2222 infants aged 11.5-22.5 months with eczema and found that 64% of those in whom the condition developed before 3 months of age had a high sensitivity to certain foods. Food allergy testing can be performed by a naturopath, nutritionist or doctor, and can be done by means of a blood test, skin prick or an elimination diet. The most common food allergens are egg, peanut, dairy, wheat and soy. Remember that an intolerance is different to an allergy – an intolerance may show a reaction 48 hrs later which makes it very difficult to discover this on your own.

Eczema is part of the 'allergy triad', along with hay fever and asthma. This tendency to allergies is actually an **imbalance in our immune system**, caused by an overactivity of one part of our immune cells (the cells that react to allergens) which



causes a suppression of others (the cells that fight infections). That is often why people with eczema can get infections easily.

Digestive problems can aggravate inflammatory and allergic conditions. Naturopaths believe that your health begins in the digestive system, so problems in this area affect health overall. Immune health is strongly connected with digestive health as well, with the good bacteria playing a big role in the development of our immune cells and our reaction to potential allergens. There is a condition that naturopaths refer to as leaky gut, which occurs when the lining of the digestive system becomes inflamed and porous. When this condition is present, toxins that should be eliminated are reabsorbed through the enlarged pores and they circulate through the body again, aggravating immune imbalances and inflammation. Constipation is another factor which can aggravate eczema, as this affects the bacteria balance in the digestive system and aggravates leaky gut.



Contact allergies are one of the most common causes of eczema. Management of this usually involves identifying the allergen (you can use good old trial and error, or get a test from your doctor) and then avoiding the allergen. If it continues after this has been removed then there is usually another factor involved.

The **Lymphatic system** is important for carrying body wastes out of cells and removing them from the body. It is possible that lymphatic congestion will cause an inflammatory response in tissues due to reduced clearance of inflammatory chemicals. Therefore, having a healthy flowing lymphatic system is important in the management of eczema.

Stress is a big one! It is fairly well known that periods of stress will cause eczema to flare up. This occurs when our stress mediator hormones cause an increase in allergic cells in the body and an increase in susceptibility to infections. Did you know that the skin has its own stress response? This can be in reaction to infections, dehydrations, topical allergens, UV light or mechanical damage (such as scratching). The skin will produce its own cortisol to reduce the inflammation, but this just feeds back into the nervous system and makes the cycle get worse. Cortisone creams work similarly to this, they will reduce the inflammation (they also strip lipids from the skin, weakening it) however they don't fix the problem long term.

Staphylococcus aureus is an unfriendly bacteria that commonly resides on the skin of eczema sufferers. This bug activates our immune system in a bad way, causing our skin to be even more susceptible to damage.

Nutrient deficiencies, especially those nutrients that are important for skin health will aggravate eczema. It is important to make sure that your diet is good, otherwise you will not only be lacking in nutrients but also aggravating inflammation if you eat



bad foods. There are some nutrients that are vital for skin health and you need to make sure that you aren't deficient. Apart from balancing a deficiency, some nutrients can be used to treat eczema as well.

It is estimated that the natural skin surface pH should be between 4-4.5. An acid skin environment keeps the friendly bacteria on our skin happy and healthy, and we want that because they help to defend us against the unfriendly bacteria which can aggravate eczema and inflammation. Topical corticosteroids and soap unfortunately change the pH of our skin to alkaline, which strips the beneficial microbes. Aim to get a body wash with a pH of 5.5, and consider installing a chlorine filter in the shower.



What to do about it

A naturopath will always treat a patient by looking at them as a whole. Therefore it goes without saying that a patient with eczema who comes to a naturopath for treatment will be looked at holistically, and all of these factors will be considered and addressed if necessary. If it all sounds too overwhelming, let your practitioner worry about it – that's what they're there for!

p.s. If you have a strong family history of eczema, then consider undertaking a prevention program during pregnancy and breastfeeding to help reduce the likelihood of your child getting eczema too. There is a certain type of friendly bacteria that when taken during pregnancy and breastfeeding may help to reduce the incidence of eczema in high risk infants.

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