

Atopic Dermatitis

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Atopic dermatitis is a common condition where the skin tends to be hypersensitive and easily irritated. The skin tends to be extremely **itchy**, resulting in an **irresistible urge to scratch**. Your skin's immune system gets turned on but has problems turning off (that why we use medications – to “hit the reset button”). It is not contagious, but tends to be hereditary. It is often associated with allergies and asthma. Although there is **no cure** for this condition, there are medications and things that you can do to keep it under control. Some people will eventually “outgrow” atopic dermatitis when they get into their teenage years, but this condition will often persist into adulthood. Good skin care is essential to control this disease.

The following recommendations should be followed:

1. The **most important** thing that you can do is **keep your skin moisturized**. I cannot emphasize enough how important this really is. Use a gentle unscented moisturizer such as Cetaphil cream, Eucerin, plain Vaseline, Aveeno, Cere-Ve. These may be purchased over the counter at most grocery stores. You should moisturize the skin several times a day (**at least 2 or 3 times per day**). A typical pattern for each day is: Prescription cream (morning) – moisturize (late morning) – moisturize (afternoon) – prescription cream (evening). Moisturizing up to **8 or 10 times per day** may initially be necessary. Use “creams” or “ointments” instead of “lotions”.
2. Limit bathing to no more than once daily: Water should be lukewarm not hot. Hot water lowers the skin's threshold for itching (making the itching worse).
3. Use a **mild soap** such as Cetaphil, Aquanil, Aveeno, Dove, Cere-Ve and rinse well.
4. After bathing, dry off only partially by patting with a towel—no rubbing. While some water is still on the skin (within 3 minutes) you should apply the steroid ointment to affected areas on the body. Then apply moisturizer all over. This locks in the moisture that is on the skin from bathing.
5. Use a laundry detergent free of dyes and perfumes (Tide-Free or Cheer-Free). Avoid fabric softeners. A ¼ cup of vinegar can be added to the wash water as a substitute. Wash all new clothes before wearing.
6. **Avoid wool clothing** because this can initiate itching. 100% cotton is best to wear.
7. Sudden temperature changes, sweating, pollens and low humidity (cold, dry air) can make your skin flare up. It is important to keep the house at a constant cool temperature. If possible, keep the humidity above 40%. The skin already has a tendency to get dry, and you don't want to make it worse. A humidifier in the home is useful.
8. Dust, the dust mite, and pet dander can irritate the skin. Vacuum homes regularly. Make sure that all carpets, blankets, and drapes are non-wool.

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9. Avoid perfumes, deodorant spray and insecticides.
10. Cigarette smoke should be avoided. If you insist on smoking - do so outside on the porch.
11. Keep chrysanthemum plants, live fir trees (such as Christmas trees) out of the house.
12. Cats, dogs, and birds may worsen atopic skin.
13. **Stressful or emotional** stimuli can trigger a flare of atopic dermatitis. Keep in a routine!
14. Folks usually do better in the summer and flare in the winter (but there are exceptions)

Here is how to use your medications:

*We try to control your condition since there is no cure. In many cases we must keep a balance in how aggressive we get with the how much control we expect. Yes, I can likely get you 100% clear – but the treatment may be so aggressive that it puts you at risk for other problems (i.e. the treatment can become worse than the disease). So let's try to get you comfortable – but you may have to live with less than 100% control.

*You may be given a **topical steroid**. Use this as directed until your skin clears. Use it only to the broken out areas on the skin. Once the skin is clear or nearly clear then you can immediately start using Elidel/Protopic (if prescribed) which are non-steroid medications. You can use Elidel or Protopic to an area long term without thinning the skin. Use Elidel/Protopic for at least 2 weeks before transitioning to a maintenance regimen of moisturizers alone to prevent rebound flaring.

The steroids are to be used to clear the eczema while Elidel/Protopic is to help “keep the lid on things”.

*You may also be given an **antibiotic**, because the skin will often become infected or colonized with bacteria (Staphylococcus) from the trauma of continually scratching.

***Antihistamines** such as Atarax or **Benadryl** may be used to control the itching. Antihistamines may cause drowsiness, dry mouth, or slow your reflexes. Do not drive or operate machinery within 8 hours of taking this type of medication. Although you can take antihistamines during the day, they are most useful at night 30 minutes to an hour before bedtime. **Claritin** (over the counter) is less sedating and better to used during the daytime.

***Moisturize! Moisturize!** Even when you are not broken out in order **to keep your skin happy**. For more info go to www.aad.org under public resource center