

Patient information from the BMJ Group

Eczema

In this section

[What is it?](#)

[What are the symptoms?](#)

[How is it diagnosed?](#)

[How common is it?](#)

[What treatments work?](#)

[What will happen?](#)

[Questions to ask](#)

Eczema

Eczema is a skin condition. It can be irritating and painful, especially for children. Fortunately there are treatments for both children and adults that can relieve the symptoms. And there are things you can do to prevent eczema from flaring up.

We've brought together the best research about eczema and weighed up the evidence about how to treat it. You can use our information to talk with your doctor and decide which treatments are best for you.

What is eczema?

Eczema is a condition that makes patches of your skin become dry, red and itchy. Scratching can make the skin bleed. It can also make the eczema worse. Sometimes the skin becomes thick and scaly.

If you have a child with eczema, there's a good chance they will grow out of it. But some people have eczema all their life. There's no cure for eczema, but there are many treatments that can help with the itchiness and **inflammation**. There are also things you can do at home to keep eczema under control.

There are [several types of eczema](#). The most common type is **atopic eczema**.^{[1] [2]} If a condition is described as atopic, it means that it's caused by an allergy. The information here is about atopic eczema, but we just call it 'eczema'.

Eczema



If you have eczema, it makes your skin itchy. But there are treatments that can help.

Key points about eczema

- About 16 in 100 children in the UK have eczema. ^[1]
- About 60 in 100 children who have eczema grow out of it or get milder symptoms as they get older. ^[2]
- Some people have mild symptoms that last a few days at a time, while other people may have more severe symptoms that last longer or never go away completely.
- Eczema can be irritating and painful, but it shouldn't prevent you or your child from taking part in normal activities.
- There are good treatments that can help keep symptoms under control.

Your skin

To understand what happens in eczema and how to treat it, it helps to know something about your skin.

- Your skin protects your body from infection and injury. The surface of your skin is made up of a thick layer of dead skin cells. These form a tough barrier that keeps poisons and germs such as **bacteria** from getting into your body. That barrier also helps to keep in your body's moisture. The dead cells eventually flake off or are

Eczema

washed away. They are always being replaced by new cells that grow from underneath. ^[3]

- Your skin keeps itself moist and soft so that it can bend and stretch without breaking. The layer of dead cells in your skin holds water, which makes it feel soft. Your skin also makes a kind of thick, oily liquid called **sebum** that helps it stay moist. Without sebum, the layer of dead cells would dry out and get brittle. When you wash with soap, you take sebum off your skin. This is why your skin and scalp can feel dry after you've washed. ^[3]

Your skin does many other jobs, too. For example, when it's hot it helps keep your body temperature normal by letting extra blood flow to the surface and by making sweat. Your skin also contains a lot of nerves that give you your sense of touch. When you're in the sun, your skin makes vitamin D.

What goes wrong in eczema

In eczema, your skin becomes **inflamed**. It gets red, itchy, thick and sore. When you scratch, it starts a vicious cycle. Here's what happens. ^[4] ^[5]



Eczema can make your skin red and itchy. Scratching can make the skin bleed.

- The top layer of your skin starts to get flaky and dry.
- When skin is dry and flaky, bacteria and irritants, such as dust or chemicals, can get into your skin. This can lead to an infection and make the itchiness worse. (See [Infections and eczema](#) to find out more.)
- Your skin can become thick and scaly, with small raised bumps or blisters.
- If you scratch the blisters, they may ooze and even bleed.
- Scratching makes the itch worse, and this leads to more scratching. Doctors call this the **'itch-scratch' cycle**.

What is an allergy?

The type of eczema we talk about here happens because of an allergy. If you have an allergy, your **immune system** (your body's system for fighting infection) is supersensitive to certain things that are harmless to other people. Your body overreacts when it comes into contact with those things. It triggers changes called **allergic reactions** .

For example, in eczema your immune system's reaction makes your skin itchy. Other conditions that are linked to allergies are hay fever and asthma. In hay fever, an allergy to pollen makes people sneeze and makes their eyes runny. If you have asthma, something irritates your lungs, making you wheeze, cough and feel short of breath. To read more, see our information on [hay fever](#) and [asthma](#) .

Allergies often run in families. But not everyone with eczema has it in their family. ^[6]

There are other types of eczema that aren't caused by an allergy. To read more, see [Types of eczema](#) .

Your immune system

Doctors think that people with eczema might have an overactive immune system. If you have this, your immune system will cause an allergic reaction when you come into contact with certain things that don't bother most people. Things that set off an allergic reaction are called **allergens** . This is how the cycle of symptoms in eczema usually starts.

Eczema happens differently in different people. Not everyone who has eczema reacts to the same things that trigger flare-ups in others. See [Things that can trigger eczema](#) for more information.

Some of the things that can trigger allergic reactions in people who have eczema are:

- House dust mites (their droppings trigger allergies)
- Animal fur, feathers or skin
- Stress
- Some foods.

Researchers aren't certain about the part food plays in triggering eczema. It may be important for some people but not for others. The same is true of stress. For some people, things such as moving to a new house or starting a new job or school cause stress that's tied to eczema flare-ups. ^[7]

Eczema: why me?

Some people are more likely to get eczema than others. It's more common in families where a lot of people have allergies such as asthma and hay fever. Doctors think that eczema is inherited in the **genes** we get from our parents.

Eczema

If both parents have eczema, a child has an 80 percent chance of getting it too. If just one parent has eczema, a child's chances of getting it is just over 50 percent. ^[7]

Eczema and the family

Children who have very bad eczema can get upset about their condition. And parents who are trying to help a child with eczema may find it stressful, too. See [How eczema can make you feel](#) for advice about how to make it easier.

Types of eczema

Here are five common kinds of eczema.

Atopic eczema

This is the most common type of eczema. When people use the word eczema, they usually mean atopic eczema. It tends to run in families where there are other allergic conditions, such as hay fever and asthma. It is also called **atopic dermatitis**.

Allergic contact dermatitis

If you have allergic contact dermatitis, your skin has an allergic reaction when you touch (contact) certain things. Some of the things (allergens) that can cause this kind of problem are fragrances, rubber and certain plants. Up to 1 in 6 people in the UK are allergic to nickel, a metal found in earrings, belt buckles and the rivets used for jeans. ^[5] The symptoms these allergens cause are similar to atopic eczema: an itchy red rash. You can prevent this allergic reaction by avoiding the substance that causes it.

Irritant contact dermatitis

This type of eczema starts when you come into contact with a harsh substance that irritates the skin. Chemicals and detergents are the kinds of things that cause it. You usually get an itchy red rash, and you usually get it on your hands. The eczema often starts after you put your hands in the chemicals or detergents repeatedly. ^[16] This type of eczema can be very bad and can last long after you've stopped all contact with the irritating substance.

Seborrhoeic dermatitis

Seborrhoeic dermatitis causes red or flaky skin. It usually affects parts of your body that have hair, or where there are folds or creases in your skin. These are the parts of your body with lots of **sebaceous glands**. These glands make oil to lubricate your skin. Sebaceous glands give seborrhoeic dermatitis its name.

Seborrhoeic dermatitis of the scalp can cause dandruff in adults. It can also affect the scalp of babies. When this happens, it's called **cradle cap**.

To read more, see [Dermatitis](#) .

Eczema

Stasis dermatitis

This type of eczema tends to affect older people with poor blood circulation. It attacks the lower legs (above the ankles). The skin often looks speckled and feels itchy and dry. Stasis dermatitis is treated in the same way as atopic eczema, and also by doing things to improve the circulation of blood in the legs.

What are the symptoms of eczema?

Eczema affects [people in different ways](#) .



If you have eczema, your skin may be red, dry and flaky.

Your skin (or your child's skin) may be: ^[6]

- Itchy
- Pink or red
- Dry and flaky
- Broken and bleeding
- Thick and tough.

If the skin becomes infected you may also get:

- Bumps filled with pus
- Crusty yellow blisters
- Wet and oozing areas of skin where the blisters have burst.

To find out more, see [Infections and eczema](#) .

Some people have mild eczema that just lasts a few days at a time. Others have very bad symptoms that never go away completely. ^[17]

Eczema

Where eczema appears on your body and how it looks depend partly on your age. ^[17]
^[10]

What eczema is like for people of different ages

- Babies and toddlers less than 2 years often get red, scaly, itchy patches on their cheeks and chin. These patches can start to ooze fluid and can become infected.
- In children aged between 2 years and about 12 years, eczema usually appears inside the elbows, behind the knees, and on the wrists, the ankles and the hands. The skin in these areas may become thick and leathery from constant scratching and rubbing. There may also be scaling and cracking around the mouth, especially if children lick their lips.
- In many cases, eczema comes and goes, so you or your child may go for weeks or months with no symptoms. Then, at other times, your skin may get itchy and scaly.
- Children who don't grow out of eczema may get eczema patches on their necks, foreheads and around their eyes.
- Adults who have eczema often just have symptoms on their hands. Both men and women can also get eczema on their nipples.
- It's unusual to get eczema for the first time as an adult. But it can happen.

How do doctors diagnose eczema?

Your doctor will usually be able to tell whether you or your child has eczema by looking at the sore or itchy patches of skin.

Eczema is especially common in the natural creases of the body, such as behind the knees and inside the elbow. So your doctor may ask to have a look at these areas. ^[17]

They may also ask you some questions about:

- Your health (or your child's health)
- When you first started getting the rash
- Whether other members of your family have allergies that go along with eczema, such as [asthma](#) or [hay fever](#) .

In most cases, GPs are able to diagnose eczema without any special tests. If your GP thinks an **allergy** is causing eczema, you can have blood tests or skin tests to find out exactly which substances you are allergic to.

Eczema

Most people who have eczema are cared for by their GP and won't go to hospital.^[2] But if your eczema isn't getting better, or you have a very bad infection, your GP may suggest you see a doctor who specialises in skin diseases (a **dermatologist**).

Dermatologists work with nurses who have also specialised in caring for people with skin problems. In some clinics, nurses prescribe treatments for eczema.

How common is eczema?

Eczema is very common in children. And it's getting even more common.^{[18] [19] [6]}

- Between 15 in 100 and 20 in 100 school-age children get eczema.^[2]
- Most children with eczema (about 90 in 100) get it before they are 5. Many get it when they are babies.^[2]
- About 60 in 100 children with eczema grow out of it in their teens.^[2]
- Between 2 in 100 and 10 in 100 adults have eczema.^[2]

What treatments work for eczema?

Eczema is a condition that causes patches of the skin to become dry, red and itchy.

Scratching eczema patches can make the skin ooze and bleed, and it can make the itching and other symptoms of eczema worse. Sometimes the skin can become thick and scaly. Your doctor may call it 'atopic eczema'.

Key points about treating and preventing eczema

- Treatments can't cure eczema, but they do relieve the symptoms.
- There are many things you can do at home to try to keep your eczema under control.
- Your doctor can also prescribe creams and ointments to help relieve your symptoms.

We've divided this section into three parts:

- [Treatments for eczema](#) : These include corticosteroid creams that help keep your symptoms under control, and the drugs called pimecrolimus and tacrolimus. [More...](#)
- [Self-care for eczema](#) : Here we look at things you can try that might help control eczema. [More...](#)

Eczema

- [Preventing eczema](#) : Here we look at whether 'friendly' bacteria (probiotics), or the foods you eat when you're pregnant and breastfeeding, can prevent your child getting eczema. [More...](#)

Treatment Group 1

Treatments for eczema

There is a range of treatments your doctor can prescribe for eczema. These won't cure your or your child's eczema, but they can help control the symptoms.

Key messages about treating eczema

- Corticosteroid creams and ointments are the main treatment for eczema. Usually they are the first treatment doctors will try. They work well for most people. They can help reduce your or your child's symptoms and prevent flare-ups. You may hear them called 'steroids' for short. But they are not the same as the anabolic steroids used by some athletes and bodybuilders.
- Simple moisturisers can also help relieve the symptoms of eczema. You'll need to use these as well as corticosteroid creams.
- Creams containing pimecrolimus and tacrolimus also work well. Pimecrolimus and tacrolimus are usually used if your or your child's symptoms aren't well controlled with corticosteroids.
- There are other treatments your doctor might recommend if the usual treatments don't work, or you have a problem related to eczema, such as severe itching or infected eczema.

Which treatments work best for eczema?

Which treatments work best? We've looked at the best research and given a rating for each treatment according to how well it works.

Treatments for eczema

Treatments that work

- [Corticosteroid creams or ointments](#) : These can help reduce inflammation and itchiness in the skin. [More...](#)
- [Pimecrolimus](#) : This cream contains a drug that calms your immune system down to reduce inflammation. [More...](#)
- [Tacrolimus](#) : This ointment contains a drug that calms your immune system down to reduce inflammation. [More...](#)

Treatments that are likely to work

- [Moisturisers](#) : Lotions, ointments and creams that help keep moisture in the skin often protect against eczema and can help relieve symptoms. Doctors may call them emollients. [More...](#)

Other treatments

The treatments listed below are sometimes used to treat eczema if usual treatments haven't worked, or if you have another problem connected with eczema. We haven't looked at the research in the same way as we have looked at the research for other treatments on our site. But we've included them here because lots of people are interested in these treatments.

- [Antibiotics and antifungals](#) : These drugs are used to treat infected eczema. [More...](#)
- [Antihistamines](#) : These medicines might help control itching. [More...](#)
- [Immunosuppressants](#) : These drugs may help calm down an overactive immune system. [More...](#)
- [Ultraviolet light](#) : Sunlight or special lamps that send out ultraviolet rays can improve some skin problems. [More...](#)
- [Wet dressings and bandaging](#) : These are bandages soaked with a moisturiser or corticosteroid and warmed before they are put on the skin. [More...](#)

Treatment Group 2

Self-care for eczema

There are many things you can try at home to help control your or your child's eczema symptoms. These might also help prevent flare-ups.

Key messages about self-care for eczema

- Using plenty of moisturiser every day can help keep your or your child's skin healthy and prevent flare-ups. To find out more, see our information on [moisturisers](#) .
- You may need to try several moisturisers to find the one that works best for you.
- Some other things may affect your or your child's symptoms, such as the clothes you wear, the detergent you use to wash your clothes and your diet. But there hasn't been good research on these.
- You may have to try a few things to see what works best for you or your child.

Eczema

- Stress doesn't cause eczema, but many people think stress can trigger flare-ups. Learning to relax may help.
- Scratching itchy eczema is tempting, but it can make it worse, and may also lead to infection. Avoiding scratching is one of the best ways to help your eczema improve.

Which self-care treatments work best for eczema?

Which treatments work best? We've looked at the best research and given a rating for each treatment according to how well it works.

Self-care for eczema

Treatments that need further study

- [Avoiding certain fabrics](#) : Some fabrics make eczema worse for some people. [More...](#)
- [Avoiding detergents](#) : Very often, soaps and detergents make eczema worse. [More...](#)
- [Avoiding animals](#) : Animal fur, feathers or skin can make some people's eczema worse. [More...](#)
- [Changing what you or your child eats](#) : Certain foods may cause an allergic reaction that affects eczema. But this is not a common cause of eczema. [More...](#)
- [Reducing levels of house dust mites](#) : Certain cleaning methods can help get rid of house dust mites, and special bed covers and sheets protect against them. [More...](#)
- [Vitamins and minerals](#) : People have tried various supplements to help eczema. [More...](#)

Treatments that are unlikely to work

- [Probiotics and fatty acids](#) : Probiotics are 'friendly bacteria' and fatty acids include evening primrose oil and fish oils. [More...](#)

Other treatments

Some people use alternative treatments to treat their eczema. We haven't looked at the research in the same way we have looked at research for other treatments on our site. But we've included them here because lots of people are interested in alternative treatments.

- [Alternative treatments](#) : These include aromatherapy, Chinese herbal medicine, hypnotherapy (usually with biofeedback) and massage. [More...](#)

Treatment Group 3

Preventing eczema

If you have eczema or asthma, or someone in your family does, you may wonder if it's possible to prevent your child getting eczema.

Key messages about preventing eczema

- Foods or supplements that encourage the growth of 'friendly' bacteria might help to prevent eczema, but there hasn't been enough research to know for certain. Products that encourage friendly bacteria are called **probiotics** and **prebiotics**. Women can take them in the last few weeks of pregnancy, or they can be given to young babies.
- Researchers have also looked at whether what women eat while they're pregnant and breastfeeding can reduce a child's risk of getting eczema. But so far there's no evidence that it does.

Which treatments work best for preventing eczema?

Which treatments work best? We've looked at the best research and given a rating for each treatment according to how well it works.

Preventing eczema

Treatments that are likely to work

- [Probiotics or prebiotics to prevent eczema](#) : Probiotics and prebiotics aim to boost the immune system by increasing the number of 'friendly' bacteria in your baby's bowels. [More...](#)

Treatments that need further study

- [Long-term breastfeeding for babies at high risk](#) : If allergies (eczema, asthma, hay fever) run in your family, you breastfeed your baby for several months. [More...](#)
- [Watching what you eat during pregnancy if eczema runs in your family](#) : While you're pregnant, you don't eat foods that might cause allergies in small babies. [More...](#)
- [Watching what you eat when you're breastfeeding](#) : While you're breastfeeding your baby, you avoid foods that may contain allergens. [More...](#)

What will happen to me?

Many children's eczema clears up when they reach their early teens.

Overall, about 60 in 100 children grow out of their eczema altogether or have milder symptoms as they grow older. But most people will still tend to have dry and irritable

Eczema

skin. And sometimes eczema can come back when you are an adult, often on your hands.
^[2]

Eczema affects people differently. You or your child will probably go through phases, called **flare-ups**, when the symptoms are especially bad. At other times, the symptoms may go away completely.^[2]

Eczema can cause dry or broken skin, which gets infected more easily than normal skin. It's important to keep an eye out for infections, as they might need treatment. To read more, see [Infections and eczema](#) .

Although eczema can sometimes cause a lot of pain and stress, most people who have it lead a normal life. There are several treatments, and it's possible to keep symptoms under control so that you hardly notice them.^[2]

Also, you can do many things to help keep your skin in good condition. These things may help prevent flare-ups and help you feel better generally. To learn more, see [Things you can do to help](#) .

Questions to ask your doctor

If you or your child has been diagnosed with eczema, you may want to talk to your doctor to find out more.

Here are some questions that you might want to ask.

- Why do I have eczema?
- Does it need to be treated?
- If so, what is the best treatment?
- Does the treatment have side effects?
- How long will the treatment last?
- Will my symptoms come back if I stop the treatment?
- Has something in particular caused this eczema?
- Will the eczema go away, or will I always have it?
- What should I do if the symptoms come back?
- Are there any special risks I need to be aware of?
- Are there things I can do at home to try to relieve the eczema?

- Are there things I shouldn't do? For example, is it all right to go swimming?

Treatments:

Corticosteroid creams and ointments

In this section

[Do they work?](#)

[What are they?](#)

[How can they help?](#)

[How do they work?](#)

[Can they be harmful?](#)

[How good is the research on corticosteroid creams and ointments?](#)

This information is for people who have eczema. It tells you about corticosteroid creams and ointments, which are used to treat eczema. It is based on the best and most up-to-date research.

Do they work?

Yes. If you rub a cream or ointment that contains a corticosteroid into your skin, or your child's, there is a strong chance that it will reduce the itching and inflammation caused by eczema. Corticosteroid creams work for nearly everyone who uses them.

You may hear these medicines called 'steroids' for short. But they are not the same as the anabolic steroids that some athletes and bodybuilders use. Instead, they are similar to chemicals your body makes to fight inflammation.

What are they?

Steroids are chemicals produced by our own bodies, but pharmacists can make them in a laboratory as well. They do a lot of different jobs in the body. One kind of steroid can reduce swelling and itching, and it's used as a topical medicine for inflamed skin.^[4] 'Topical' means you put it on the skin.

Topical steroids are mixed into creams or ointments that you can gently rub into patches of eczema that are red and itchy. Ointments, which are quite greasy, are best when the eczema is very dry, and creams or lotions are good when the eczema is weeping.^[24]
^[19]

Topical steroids come in four different strengths: mild, medium, strong and very strong.
^[4] ^[25]

You usually need to use this kind of medicine once or twice a day.^[24] After a bath is a good time to put it on, when your skin is full of water and the medicine can get into the skin more easily.^[4]

Using a strong topical steroid for a long time is more likely to give you side effects than using it for just a short time.^[4] How strong the medicine needs to be and how long you

Eczema

need to use it will depend on how severe your eczema is, where it is, and the side effects you might get.

During a flare-up, when the eczema can get very bad, your doctor may want you to use a strong cream or ointment for a short period and then switch to a weaker one. This gets the flare-up under control quickly. ^[4] ^[25]

Many different steroid ointments, creams and lotions are used for eczema. Some of the common ones are listed here (with some brand names):

Steroid type	Brand names	Strength	Available over the counter?
hydrocortisone 0.5% or 1.0%	Dioderm, Efcortelan, Hc45, Lanacort	Mild	Some brands of hydrocortisone are available over the counter, but only for children over 10
clobetasone butyrate 0.05%	Eumovate	Medium	Yes, for adults and children over 12
betamethasone valerate 0.1%	Betnovate	Strong	No
clobetasol propionate	Dermovate	Very strong	No

If your eczema is fairly mild, you may wish to buy one of the steroid creams available over the counter. But, bear in mind that steroid creams can make certain skin conditions worse, and should not be used on some parts of the body. If you are not sure whether your skin condition, or your child's, is eczema, it is best to ask the pharmacist's advice or see your GP before using any steroid cream.

The pharmacist or their assistant will probably ask you some questions about how you plan to use the steroid creams you wish to buy.

How can they help?

The main ways topical steroids can help are by: ^[25] ^[26] ^[27]

- Making the skin less itchy, red and inflamed
- Helping you not to scratch and damage the skin
- Making the skin look better
- Reducing scaling and dry skin
- Reducing oozing and crusting.

One study found that a strong steroid cream used for three days worked just as well as a weak steroid cream used for seven days. ^[27]

Eczema

Once your symptoms are under control you will probably need to keep using steroids from time to time. There's some evidence that using a steroid two days a week helps prevent symptoms flaring up again. ^[28] ^[29]

It is not clear whether using a steroid cream twice a day works better than using it once a day. ^[28]

How do they work?

If you have eczema, your **immune system** sometimes reacts in an abnormal way to things that are harmless to other people. The things that make your immune system react abnormally are called **allergens**. The result is an **allergic reaction**. The reaction makes your skin inflamed, itchy and red. Topical steroids work by calming down the immune system and reducing this reaction.

Can they be harmful?

Overall, rubbing on steroid creams and moisturisers causes few problems. About 1 in 10 people who used a steroid cream reported minor side effects, such as burning, irritations and stinging when they first applied this treatment. ^[26] Very rarely, using a steroid cream makes the skin lighter or darker.

Many people worry that steroid creams and ointments can make their skin thin. But the research on this is not clear. Some studies show that if you use steroid creams for a very long time and at very high doses, your skin gets thinner. Other studies show that this doesn't happen. ^[30]

If your skin gets too thin, it splits and scars easily. But it takes a long time for this to happen, and the skin returns to normal after the treatment is stopped. ^[31] ^[32]

In general, it's best to use the lowest-strength steroid that is effective. Stronger steroids should only be used on children for short periods.

How good is the research on corticosteroid creams and ointments?

Lots of studies have looked at corticosteroid creams and ointments for eczema. Most of these studies are more than 25 years old and their results are not reliable. Even so, several recent good-quality studies (called **randomised controlled trials**) have shown that these treatments do relieve symptoms of eczema in most people who use them.

All the studies found that corticosteroid creams and ointments help to control the symptoms of eczema or reduce flare-ups. ^[33] ^[34] ^[35] ^[27] ^[36]

Pimecrolimus

In this section

[Does it work?](#)

[What is it?](#)

[How can it help?](#)

Eczema

[How does it work?](#)

[Can it be harmful?](#)

[How good is the research on pimecrolimus?](#)

This information is for people who have eczema. It tells you about pimecrolimus, a treatment used for eczema. It is based on the best and most up-to-date research.

Does it work?

Yes. There's a good chance that using pimecrolimus will help relieve your symptoms of eczema and prevent flare-ups. But it's quite a new treatment, and doctors don't know whether it can cause serious side effects in the long term. For this reason, doctors only tend to prescribe pimecrolimus when other treatments haven't helped.

What is it?

Pimecrolimus (brand name Elidel) comes as a cream that you rub into the areas of your skin that have eczema. It works like corticosteroid creams and ointments, by calming down the inflammation in the skin.

Pimecrolimus is sometimes called a **topical immunomodulator** (TIM for short). Topical means that you put it on your skin. Immunomodulator means that it works on your immune system (the parts of your body that protect you against infection).

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), the government body that advises doctors about treatments, has issued guidance on when pimecrolimus should be used.^[37] It says that doctors can prescribe pimecrolimus if corticosteroid creams and ointments haven't worked. This treatment isn't recommended by NICE for mild eczema, or for adults. It can be used for moderate eczema on the face and neck of children aged between 2 and 16, if there's a risk of side effects from further use of steroids.^[37]

Pimecrolimus should only be prescribed by doctors with a special knowledge of treating skin problems. They might be GPs or hospital specialists (usually dermatologists, doctors who specialise in skin problems).

How can it help?

Pimecrolimus can:^[38]

- Help clear up patches of eczema
- Prevent eczema flaring up
- Help you or your child get on with life more easily by helping to relieve the symptoms of eczema.

In one study, eczema patches in half of the people who used pimecrolimus were clear or almost clear after four weeks.^[39]

Pimecrolimus doesn't seem to be as good as either [tacrolimus](#) or strong steroid creams. ^[38] We don't know how well it compares to mild corticosteroid creams. To read more about steroids, see [Corticosteroid creams and ointments](#) .

How does it work?

Pimecrolimus works by calming down your immune system. It does this by stopping some cells in your immune system from working. This should help reduce or prevent the allergic reaction that makes your skin inflamed, irritated, and broken.

Can it be harmful?

When you first use pimecrolimus you may have a burning feeling and some redness. This shouldn't last long. But because pimecrolimus is so new, we don't know for certain if it can cause serious side effects. So doctors don't yet know if it has any advantages over corticosteroid creams and ointments. ^[38]

Pimecrolimus affects your immune system. The idea is that this stops your body reacting to whatever is causing your eczema. But calming down your immune system may also stop it fighting illnesses properly. In the long term, it's possible that this could increase your risk of infections, or the risk of skin cancer or other kinds of cancer. ^[37] ^[40]

Short-term studies haven't shown an increased risk of cancer for people who use pimecrolimus. ^[38] But no studies have looked at people using pimecrolimus for longer than a year or two. So, there's not enough research to know about any long-term risks.

You'll probably only be prescribed pimecrolimus by a specialist if other treatments haven't worked for you. Advice for doctors says people should only use these treatments for a short time, at the lowest possible dose. ^[23]

To read more, see [Pimecrolimus and tacrolimus and the risk of cancer](#) .

How good is the research on pimecrolimus?

There's good evidence that pimecrolimus can help relieve the symptoms of eczema. ^[38] But because pimecrolimus is so new, there isn't any good evidence to show that it causes less harm than steroid treatments. So doctors don't yet know if pimecrolimus has significant advantages over [corticosteroid creams and ointments](#) .

We found one summary of the research (called a [systematic review](#)) that looked at the results from 31 good-quality studies (called [randomised controlled trials](#)) involving more than 8,000 people. ^[38] After a few weeks, the people using pimecrolimus were much more likely to see their eczema clear up. The summary also found that pimecrolimus can prevent flare-ups. Pimecrolimus has also been shown to help babies with eczema. There are also a number of smaller studies published since the systematic review.

Tacrolimus

Eczema

In this section

[Does it work?](#)

[What is it?](#)

[How can it help?](#)

[How does it work?](#)

[Can it be harmful?](#)

[How good is the research on tacrolimus?](#)

This information is for people who have eczema. It tells you about tacrolimus, a treatment used for eczema. It is based on the best and most up-to-date research.

Does it work?

Yes. There's a good chance that using tacrolimus will help relieve your symptoms of eczema and prevent flare-ups. But tacrolimus is quite a new treatment. So doctors don't yet know if it can cause serious side effects. For this reason, doctors only tend to prescribe tacrolimus if other treatments haven't helped.

What is it?

Tacrolimus (brand name Protopic) is a fairly new treatment. It comes as an ointment that you rub into areas of your skin that have eczema. It works like corticosteroid creams and ointments by calming down the inflammation in your skin.

Tacrolimus is sometimes called a **topical immunomodulator** (TIM for short). Topical means that you put it on your skin. Immunomodulator means that it works on your immune system (the parts of your body that protect you against infection).

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), the government body that advises doctors about treatments, has issued guidance on when tacrolimus should be used. It says that adults and children over 2 years may be prescribed tacrolimus if: ^[37]

- They have moderate or severe eczema that hasn't been helped by corticosteroid creams
- There's a risk of getting side effects, especially skin-thinning, from using corticosteroid creams.

Tacrolimus can also be prescribed to prevent flare-ups in people with moderate to severe eczema who have four or more flare-ups a year and have responded to earlier treatment with the medicine. ^[23]

Tacrolimus may be prescribed only by doctors with special knowledge of treating skin problems. They might be GPs or hospital specialists (usually **dermatologists**, doctors who specialise in skin problems).

How can it help?

Tacrolimus can: ^[41] ^[42] ^[43] ^[44] ^[45] ^[46] ^[47]

- Help clear up patches of eczema

Eczema

- Help you or your child get on with life more easily by helping the symptoms of eczema.
- Reduce the number of flare-ups you have.

In one study, the eczema symptoms cleared up or nearly cleared up in more than half the people who used tacrolimus compared with just 1 in 4 people who used a dummy treatment (placebo).^[41]

How does it work?

Tacrolimus calms down your immune system . It does this by stopping some cells in your immune system from working. This should help reduce or prevent the allergic reaction that makes your skin inflamed , irritated and broken.

Can it be harmful?

When you first use tacrolimus you may have a burning feeling and have some redness. This shouldn't last long. But because tacrolimus is so new, we don't know if it can cause serious side effects. So doctors don't yet know if it has any advantages over corticosteroid creams and ointments.^[41]

Tacrolimus affects your immune system. The idea is that this stops your body reacting to whatever is causing your eczema. But calming down your immune system may also stop it fighting illnesses properly. In the long term, it's possible that this could increase your risk of infections, or your risk of skin cancer or other kinds of cancer.^{[37] [40]}

Short-term studies haven't shown an increased risk of cancer in people who use tacrolimus.^{[48] [49]} But there hasn't been enough research to know about any long-term risks.

You'll probably only be prescribed tacrolimus by a specialist if the other treatments haven't worked for you. Advice for doctors says people should only use these treatments for a short time, at the lowest possible dose.^[23]

To read more, see [Pimecrolimus and tacrolimus and the risk of cancer](#) .

How good is the research on tacrolimus?

There's good evidence that tacrolimus can help relieve the symptoms of eczema. But because tacrolimus is so new, there isn't any good evidence to show that it causes less harm than corticosteroid treatments. So doctors don't yet know if tacrolimus has significant advantages over corticosteroid creams and ointments.^[41]

We found two summaries of the research (called systematic reviews) and lots of other studies. The summaries and the other research papers found that tacrolimus helped the symptoms of eczema in both adults and children.^{[41] [47]}

Moisturisers

In this section

[Do they work?](#)

[What are they?](#)

[How can they help?](#)

[How do they work?](#)

[Can they be harmful?](#)

[How good is the research on moisturisers?](#)

This information is for people who have eczema. It tells you about moisturisers, a treatment used for eczema. It is based on the best and most up-to-date research.

Do they work?

Yes. Putting moisturiser onto the skin will probably help your or your child's symptoms of eczema.

What are they?

Moisturisers are lotions, ointments and creams that you smooth onto your skin, add to your bath water or use in the shower. They work by stopping the skin losing water or by adding water to the skin. ^[50] (Doctors call moisturisers 'emollients'.)

Moisturisers are the most widely prescribed treatment for eczema and are used all the time to keep the skin in good condition. Most doctors advise people with eczema or the parents of children with eczema to use plenty of moisturiser at least three times a day to help prevent 'flare-ups'. Guidelines for doctors say it's best to use moisturiser every four hours during the day, and to use lots of it. ^[51]

However, there hasn't been enough research to tell us that moisturisers definitely work. ^[50]

You can buy almost all moisturisers for eczema over the counter at a pharmacy. The only exceptions are if the moisturiser contains another ingredient that you can only get on prescription.

Ointments, which are greasy, are usually used when the skin is very dry. When the skin is sore or has weepy blisters, then lotions or creams are used because they are easier to apply. ^[4] Lotions are easier to apply on hairy parts of the body. A good time to apply any kind of moisturiser is after a bath or shower because the moisturiser helps to 'lock' water into the skin. You can add some moisturisers to the bath, and some can be used as soap substitutes.

There's no easy way to know which moisturiser is the right one for you or your child. And moisturisers vary in how greasy they are. So you might have to try a few before you find one that feels good on your or on your child's skin.

Some of the commonly used moisturisers are listed below.

Moisturisers you put onto the skin

- Liquid and white soft paraffin ointment
- Diprobase cream and ointment
- E45 cream and lotion.

Moisturiser bath additives

- Balneum bath oil
- E45 emollient bath oil
- Oilatum Emollient bath additive.

Soap substitutes

- Aqueous cream
- Emulsifying ointment.

You need to be careful when you use creams and ointments that contain white soft paraffin (including Diprobase) as these can make fabrics catch fire easily, for example when they soak into dressings, bandages, clothes and bedding.^[52] Don't smoke or use a naked flame when using these products. Also, change your or your child's clothes and bedding regularly to reduce the risk of fire.

[Topical corticosteroids](#) (corticosteroid creams or ointments) are often used along with some kind of moisturiser.^[50] The research shows that a lot of children prefer this combination of treatments instead of just the topical corticosteroid on its own.^[53] You'll use a lot more moisturiser than you use corticosteroid cream. Doctors say you should be using 10 times as much moisturiser as corticosteroid cream. But it's best to avoid using moisturiser immediately after putting on corticosteroid cream. Wait 30 minutes so the corticosteroid cream can sink into the skin.^[51]

How can they help?

Using a moisturiser on your or your child's skin regularly can help by:^[54] ^[55]

- Making the skin look and feel less dry
- Reducing itchiness.

How do they work?

Normal skin acts as a good barrier against things that start an allergic reaction (allergens). If you have eczema, your skin becomes dry, scaly, and brittle. Then the natural barrier can crack or break. ^[53] Once the skin stops working so well, it loses water more easily. That makes the symptoms worse. Doctors think that if you moisturise your skin, the barrier will work better. It will keep the things that can trigger eczema out. ^[53]

Doctors also think that moisturisers keep the skin flexible, soothe it if it's inflamed , and make it feel less itchy and sore. ^[50]

Can they be harmful?

In the studies we looked at, the only problem was that some people got a burning feeling when they put the moisturiser on. But less than 2 patients in 100 complained of burning. ^[50] If this happens, try another type of moisturiser to see if it suits you better.

How good is the research on moisturisers?

There isn't good evidence that moisturisers can help to relieve your symptoms of eczema. ^[56] But doctors agree that they work well in helping to control eczema.

Here's what we found:

- Three studies compared different moisturisers. One study found that using a moisturiser that contained 4 percent urea and 4 percent sodium chloride reduced skin dryness more than using another that contained glycerin. ^[57] But two studies found that different moisturisers worked as well as each other. ^[56] ^[57]
- One small study compared using a moisturiser with using a mild corticosteroid cream. The moisturiser worked just as well to relieve the symptoms of eczema as the corticosteroid cream. ^[58]
- But other studies that compared moisturisers with stronger corticosteroid creams found that the corticosteroids worked better. ^[59]
- Some studies have found that moisturisers don't seem to make much difference. ^[60] ^[61] ^[62] ^[63] But most doctors agree that they can help.

Wet dressings and bandaging

In this section

[Do they work?](#)

[What are they?](#)

[How can they help?](#)

[How do they work?](#)

Eczema

[Can they be harmful?](#)

This information is for people who have eczema. It tells you about wet dressings and bandaging, a treatment used for severe eczema that hasn't been helped by usual treatments. It is based on the best and most up-to-date research.

Do they work?

We're not sure. Some research shows that wet wrap dressings and bandaging helps eczema in some people, but other research suggests they don't. We need more research to say for certain whether this treatment helps eczema symptoms.

What are they?

One way to do wet wraps (an older method) is to soak bandages in moisturiser or [corticosteroid cream](#) and then apply them, warm, to the skin. Then you put dry bandages on top. ^[64] Another more modern way is to put a thick moisturiser or corticosteroid cream on the skin first, then put on bandages soaked in warm water, and finally, put on dry bandages. ^[65] These kinds of dressings can be used to cover the entire body or small areas and single limbs. They're often used to help topical corticosteroids soak into the skin.

The aim of these dressings is to:

- Protect the skin from scratching and allow it to heal
- Help moisturisers and topical corticosteroids soak into the skin ^[64]
- Cool and soothe the skin
- Reduce [inflammation](#).

Wet wraps are usually used when other treatments have failed, especially when a person's eczema is very bad. They can be used for short periods during really bad flare-ups or only at specific times: at night for example, when itchy sore skin can be particularly uncomfortable. ^[64] If your doctor thinks bandaging might help, you may need to go to a clinic, where a specially-trained nurse will show you how to do it.

How can they help?

Studies show that using wet wraps regularly may work in these ways: ^[65] ^[66]

- Cooling the skin
- Reducing inflammation
- Relieving itchiness

Eczema

- Helping you or your child feel better and sleep better.

However, these studies are not very good quality, so we don't know whether people can benefit.

How do they work?

When eczema is severe, it can cover a person's whole body. Wet wraps seem to help in these cases because they can cool and soothe the skin quickly. They may help get a lot of moisture into the skin. ^[64] ^[4]

Besides moisturising, wet wraps may help medicines work better. For example, we know that when corticosteroid creams or ointments are covered with a bandage, they are more likely to soak into the skin. ^[66] So wet wraps might make steroids work better. ^[64] ^[4]

Can they be harmful?

There is some evidence that when wet wraps are used with topical corticosteroids and moisturising lotions together, corticosteroids can make the skin thinner. Usually the skin returns to normal when you stop the treatment. ^[67] ^[68] ^[69] ^[31] We found very little good information on the harmful effects of using corticosteroids for a long time. But we know that people who use potent (strong) corticosteroid creams for a long time can get patches of thin skin and stretch marks that never return to normal. ^[50]

Overall, rubbing on corticosteroid creams and moisturisers without wet wraps, the way people usually do, causes very few problems. In the research we looked at, 1 in 10 people who used a corticosteroid cream or lotion reported minor side effects, such as burning, irritation, and stinging when they first applied their treatment. ^[70] Very rarely, using a topical corticosteroid makes the skin lighter or darker. ^[71] We don't know if using wraps increases these effects, because no good studies have been carried out. ^[4]

One study found that using wet wraps with corticosteroids for a long time was linked with bacterial infection and also with a drop in the level of an important **hormone** called cortisol. ^[66] One of the things this hormone does is keep our blood pressure normal. (If our cortisol levels drop, it can cause our blood pressure to suddenly fall, which can be very dangerous.)

Antibiotics and antifungals

In this section

[Do they work?](#)

[What are they?](#)

[How can they help?](#)

This information is for people who have eczema. It tells you about antibiotics and antifungals, a treatment used for eczema.

Do they work?

We haven't looked in detail at the research on antibiotics and antifungals for people with eczema. (For more information, see Our method.) But we have included them because you or your child may sometimes need them.

What are they?

It is very common for people with eczema to get **infections** on their skin. This can happen if **bacteria** or **fungi** get through the first layer of skin and start to grow. See [Infections and eczema](#) for more information.

If your, or your child's, skin looks infected, your doctor may recommend a drug to get rid of the infection. Medicines that kill bacteria are called antibiotics. Medicines that target fungi are called antifungals. Antibiotics and antifungals come as tablets or capsules and as creams.

How can they help?

Antibiotics don't seem to help eczema that isn't infected.^[50] But if you do get a skin infection, your doctor will probably recommend an antibiotic to clear it up.

Another skin condition, called **seborrhoeic eczema** or **seborrhoeic dermatitis**, seems to be linked to fungi. Antifungal medicines are often used to treat this condition. To read more, see [Seborrhoeic dermatitis](#).

Antihistamines

In this section

[Do they work?](#)

[What are they?](#)

[How can they help?](#)

[Can they be harmful?](#)

This information is for people who have eczema. It tells you about antihistamines, a treatment used for eczema.

Do they work?

We haven't looked at the research on antihistamines in the same detail we have the other treatments for eczema. (For more information, see Our method.) But we've included some information because you may be interested in this treatment.

What are they?

Your doctor may prescribe a drug called an antihistamine for you or your child, if the itching is making it very hard for you to sleep. But doctors are advised only to use antihistamines for a short time. The idea is that antihistamines may relieve the itching caused by eczema.^[50] Antihistamines are often used to treat allergic skin rashes, insect

bites, and stings. But doctors don't know for sure how well antihistamines relieve the itching in eczema.

How can they help?

There are two types of antihistamine: one kind makes you sleepy (sedating antihistamines) and the other doesn't. Some doctors think only the kind that makes you sleepy can help with eczema. They say it only works because it helps patients get a good night's rest. Plus, when you're asleep, you don't scratch, and that keeps the symptoms from getting worse. ^[50]

We found one big summary of research that looked at more than 20 studies where people with eczema took antihistamines. ^[50] None of the studies showed clear evidence that the antihistamines that make you sleepy help relieve the symptoms of eczema. In fact, the review found that there is very little evidence that any kind of antihistamine works in eczema.

Doctors who treat eczema are interested in a group of drugs called 'mast cell stabilisers'. Like antihistamines, mast cell stabilisers are used to treat allergies like hay fever. An example of this kind of drug is sodium cromoglicate (the brand name for the capsule form is Nalcrom). Doctors thought that sodium cromoglicate might help relieve the symptoms of eczema. But so far, the research hasn't shown any clear evidence that cromoglicate is a good treatment for eczema. ^[50]

Can they be harmful?

The review didn't talk about the side effects that people got when they took antihistamines for eczema. But we know that antihistamines can cause side effects when you take them for other conditions, especially drowsiness. You shouldn't drive or operate machinery if you are taking an antihistamine that makes you drowsy. ^[72] An antihistamine called promethazine can cause dangerous breathing problems in very young children. ^[73] It isn't recommended for children under 2. ^[72]

Immunosuppressants

In this section

[Do they work?](#)

[What are they?](#)

[How can they help?](#)

[Can they be harmful?](#)

This information is for people who have eczema. It tells you about immunosuppressants, a treatment used for eczema.

Do they work?

We haven't looked at the research on immunosuppressants in as much detail as the other treatments for eczema. (For more information, see Our method.) But we've included some information about them here because you might be interested in them.

What are they?

Immunosuppressants are drugs that doctors use to slow down your immune system . When that system is too active, it can cause allergic reactions to certain substances.

Corticosteroids (or 'steroids' for short) are immunosuppressants. They are usually used as [creams or ointments](#) applied to the skin, but they can be taken as tablets. These are not the same as the anabolic steroids taken by some athletes and bodybuilders. Instead, they are similar to chemicals your body makes to fight inflammation.

Other types of immunosuppressants can also be taken as tablets, but are only used for eczema when the symptoms are very bad and other treatments haven't helped. You are only likely to be prescribed an immunosuppressant drug by a skin specialist (a dermatologist), not a GP.

How can they help?

One drug sometimes used for eczema is ciclosporin (brand names for the capsule form are Neoral and Sandimmun). This drug was first used for people who had had an organ transplant. It helped keep their body from rejecting the new organ.

We found a review of research that looked at 12 studies of ciclosporin. In two of these studies, ciclosporin was used on the skin.

One study found that ciclosporin used on the skin helped eczema and one study found that it didn't. The reviewers concluded that there wasn't enough evidence to say whether ciclosporin used on the skin can help treat conditions like eczema. ^[50]

The review did find that ciclosporin tablets helped people with eczema. Studies showed that ciclosporin tablets helped reduce itching and improve sleep.

A more recent review of the research found 14 studies looking at ciclosporin tablets. The studies all found that these tablets can help with eczema when taken for a short time. ^[74]

Can they be harmful?

Cyclosporin can cause some very serious side effects in the kidneys and the liver, even if only taken for a short period of time.

Immunosuppressants can also increase your risk of infections and your risk some kinds of cancer. ^[75] Because of these side effects, the researchers concluded that people with eczema should not take ciclosporin for long periods.

Treatment with ultraviolet light

In this section

[Does it work?](#)

[What is it?](#)

[How can it help?](#)

[Can it be harmful?](#)

Eczema

This information is for people who have eczema. It tells you about treatment with ultraviolet light, a treatment used for eczema.

Does it work?

We haven't looked at the research on this treatment in the same detail as the other treatments on our site. But we've included some information about it here in case you are interested.

What is it?

Doctors started to use ultraviolet light to treat eczema after they noticed that some people who had eczema got better in the summer. Also, we know that ultraviolet light helps people with psoriasis, another kind of skin condition.

Ultraviolet light can be used on its own or with a drug called psoralen. This drug makes skin more sensitive to ultraviolet light, so the light treatment is more likely to work. The combination is known as PUVA, or psoralen plus ultraviolet A (a type of ultraviolet light). Psoralen comes as tablets or as a solution that you add to the bath.

Light treatments are only used if usual treatments like corticosteroid creams haven't worked. You will need to see a specialist (a dermatologist).

How can it help?

We found some research that shows that ultraviolet light relieves eczema in many people. But most of the studies we found were very small. Also, they only looked at the effects of light treatment given for a very short time. We found no studies that looked at PUVA.

Can it be harmful?

We don't know what the risks are if people who have eczema get this kind of treatment for many years. However, we know that ultraviolet light can burn the skin. And repeated exposure to ultraviolet light is linked to skin cancer, especially in young people.^[50] If skin cancer runs in your family, treatment with ultraviolet light may be too risky. Talk to your doctor about the risk.

Vitamins and minerals

In this section

[Do they work?](#)

[What are they?](#)

[How can they help?](#)

[How do they work?](#)

[Can they be harmful?](#)

[How good is the research on vitamins and minerals?](#)

This information is for people who have eczema. It tells you about taking vitamins and minerals, a self-care treatment sometimes tried for eczema. It is based on the best and most up-to-date research.

Do they work?

We don't know. There's not enough good quality evidence to say.

What are they?

Vitamins and minerals are nutrients. Some people have tried taking different types of vitamins, and the mineral zinc, to see if they help with eczema symptoms.

How can they help?

We don't know if they can help.

We found one summary of the evidence that looked at 11 studies with 596 people taking a variety of dietary supplements, including studies of zinc, selenium, vitamin B6, vitamin D, and vitamin E. None of the studies included provided any good evidence that these vitamins and minerals could help. ^[76]

In one study, half the adults and children who took vitamin E supplements had much less eczema after eight months. But only 1 of 46 (2 percent) who took a dummy supplement (a placebo) said their eczema had reduced. In 3 of 20 who took the supplements, the eczema cleared up completely. ^[77]

But other studies found that vitamin E doesn't help people with eczema. And there's no good evidence that taking other vitamins, including multivitamins or Vitamin B6, can help.

There's no good evidence to show that taking zinc supplements, or any other type of minerals, can help your eczema. ^[78]

How do they work?

Some people think that skin problems like eczema might be a result of not having enough vitamins or minerals in your diet. But there's no research to show if this is true.

Can they be harmful?

There's not much evidence to show whether taking extra vitamins and minerals can be harmful for people with eczema.

In one study we looked at, one child had a rash after taking a vitamin B-6 supplement. ^[79]

In a small study of zinc supplements, one child's eczema became much worse and another child got an itchy rash. But we don't know if these reactions were caused by the zinc supplements. ^[80]

How good is the research on vitamins and minerals?

We found two small studies looking at vitamins.^{[81] [82]} But the results were not clear enough to say whether vitamins were helpful.

We found one small study in children, looking at zinc. Again, the results are not clear enough to see whether zinc helps.^[78]

A summary of the evidence ([systematic review](#)) included single studies looking at selenium, zinc, vitamin B6, and vitamin D, and one study that looked at vitamin D and E. All of these were small or had problems in their design, and the results weren't clear enough to say whether these vitamins or minerals were helpful.^[76]

Probiotics and fatty acids

In this section

[Do they work?](#)

[What are they?](#)

[How can they help?](#)

[How do they work?](#)

[Can they be harmful?](#)

[How good is the research on probiotics and fatty acids?](#)

This information is for people who have eczema. It tells you about taking fatty acids or probiotics, a self-care treatment used for eczema. It is based on the best and most up-to-date research.

Do they work?

No. The research shows that taking fatty acids like evening primrose oil, or probiotics as supplements or drinks, is unlikely to help people with eczema.

What are they?

Essential fatty acids are nutrients that the body needs to take in through food, because they can't be made in the body itself. Many foods contain essential fatty acids, and they are also available as supplements. Some studies have looked at whether taking supplements of fatty acids including fish oil and evening primrose oil, can help with eczema symptoms.

Probiotics are sometimes called 'friendly bacteria'. They are bacteria that live naturally in our digestive systems, and may help protect against infection and regulate our immune systems. They are available as supplements and drinks, such as fermented yoghurt drinks.

How can they help?

The research shows that probiotics and essential fatty acids don't help. In studies, people taking the supplements were no more likely to have an improvement in symptoms than people not taking them.^{[83] [84] [76]}

How do they work?

There's no reason to suppose that they work.

Can they be harmful?

There is not much information about whether these supplements can be harmful. In one of the studies we looked at, some of the children taking one type of probiotic supplement got diarrhoea. ^[85]

How good is the research on probiotics and fatty acids?

For probiotics, we found one summary of the evidence (a **systematic review**) covering 12 studies, with more than 780 children with eczema. ^[83] Taking supplements made no difference to their symptoms.

For fatty acids, we found one summary of the evidence covering 20 studies, with more than 1,300 people. The studies looked at different types of fatty acids, including evening primrose oil, borage oil, blackcurrant seed oil, and fish oil. They made no difference to people's symptoms. ^[84]

Another summary of the evidence looked just at evening primrose oil and borage oil. It also found that these treatments didn't help people's symptoms. ^[86]

Another summary of the evidence looked at studies of dietary supplements, and included three studies of fish oil, and one each of sea buckthorn oil, hempseed oil, and sunflower oil. All these studies were small and many had problems with their design, and there was no clear evidence that any of these fatty acids could help. ^[76]

Avoiding certain fabrics

In this section

[Does it work?](#)

[What is it?](#)

[How can it help?](#)

[How does it work?](#)

[Can it be harmful?](#)

[How good is the research on avoiding certain fabrics?](#)

This information is for people who have eczema. It tells you about avoiding certain fabrics, a self-care treatment used for eczema. It is based on the best and most up-to-date research.

Does it work?

We're not sure. If you use clothes made of soft (rather than rough) fabrics, it may help your, or your child's, eczema. But there's not enough research to say for sure.

What is it?

Many substances can irritate your, or your child's, skin. This irritation may make the eczema symptoms worse or trigger a flare-up. Some fabrics, such as wool, and some synthetic fabrics, are known to irritate the skin of some people with eczema. So avoiding some kinds of cloth may help some people with eczema. ^[2]

However, the research shows that the rougher the fabric is, the more irritating it is. So it may be more important to avoid all rough fabrics than some certain kinds of cloth (synthetics, for example, or natural ones like wool). ^{[87] [88] [89] [90]}

How can it help?

If some kinds of fabric make your, or your child's, eczema worse, then avoiding them may improve symptoms. You or your child may feel less itchy and be more comfortable generally. ^{[90] [50]}

Rougher, heavier fabrics that are made of synthetics rather than cotton seem to be irritating for people with eczema. ^{[87] [89]} This may be especially important when you get hot and sweaty: for example, during exercise. ^[87]

In some of the studies we looked at, people with eczema tested different kinds of fabrics. Some people said that a few of the fabrics irritated their skin. The problems went away when they stopped wearing the irritating cloth. ^{[87] [88] [89] [90]}

How does it work?

Many things irritate the skin of people with eczema. That's because dry, flaky skin has less moisture in it to act as a barrier. Some of the common irritants are some kinds of fabric, dust, and some detergents. Not using rough fabrics that irritate the skin may help control symptoms. ^[2]

Can it be harmful?

There's no evidence that avoiding certain types of fabric can be harmful.

How good is the research on avoiding certain fabrics?

We found only three studies that looked at whether some fabrics irritate the skin of people with eczema. ^{[88] [87] [90]}

- Two studies found that rougher, heavier fabrics made of synthetics rather than cotton seemed to be more irritating for people with eczema.
- One study in babies found that cotton and regular nappies were just as irritating.

Avoiding detergents

In this section

[Does it work?](#)

[What is it?](#)

[How can it help?](#)

[How does it work?](#)

[Can it be harmful?](#)

[How good is the research on avoiding detergents?](#)

This information is for people who have eczema. It tells you about avoiding detergents, a self-care treatment used for eczema. It is based on the best and most up-to-date research.

Does it work?

We're not sure. There's not enough evidence to say whether using some detergents and not others to wash your clothes and bedding will help to relieve your eczema.

What is it?

Many substances can irritate the skin. Irritations can make eczema symptoms worse or trigger a flare-up. Detergents seem to be irritating to some people with eczema.

There are two main types of detergent: those that contain enzymes and those that don't. Detergents with enzymes are sometimes called **biological**. Those that don't contain enzymes are called **non-biological**. Some scientists think that detergents that contain enzymes may be more harmful to people with eczema. ^[50]

How can it help?

We don't know if avoiding certain detergents can help. It may do. But there's no evidence that using a certain type of detergent helps to relieve eczema symptoms. ^[50]

How does it work?

Many things irritate the skin of people with eczema. That's because dry, flaky skin has less moisture in it to act as a barrier. Some common irritants are wool, synthetic fabrics, dust and some detergents. So, in theory, it may help to avoid using detergents that seem irritating to people with eczema.

So far, no one has done any research on whether avoiding detergents altogether actually helps people with eczema. The only research on detergents found that eczema doesn't get better or worse, whether you use biological or non-biological detergent. ^[50] But there's only been one, small study.

Can it be harmful?

There were no harmful effects in the research we looked at.

How good is the research on avoiding detergents?

We found only one study that tested whether detergents with enzymes can irritate the skin of people with eczema.

This study included 25 adults (aged 17 years to 59 years) with eczema. Half the group used biological detergent, half used non-biological detergent. This study showed that the kind of detergent used made no difference to people's skin.^[50] There have been no similar studies with children.

Avoiding animals

In this section

[Does it work?](#)

[What is it?](#)

[How can it help?](#)

[How does it work?](#)

[Can it be harmful?](#)

[How good is the research on avoiding animals?](#)

This information is for people who have eczema. It tells you about avoiding animals, a self-care treatment used for eczema. It is based on the best and most up-to-date research.

Does it work?

We're not sure. There is not enough research for us to say one way or the other whether avoiding contact with animals, such as pets, will help relieve eczema symptoms.

What is it?

Anyone can be allergic to animal fur, feathers or skin. If you have eczema, your skin may become **inflamed** whenever you come into contact with an animal and your eczema symptoms may get worse.^[20]

If you've noticed that your own or your child's eczema gets worse when animals are around, then staying away from animals might help keep the eczema from flaring up. However, no research at all has been done showing that avoiding animals helps people with eczema.

Bear in mind that even if an animal is removed from your home, it could take months for your child's skin to change in any way. That's because tiny bits of hair and dead skin cells (dander) from animals stays in carpets, cushions and furniture fabrics for a long time.

How can it help?

We don't know if it can help. There's no evidence that keeping animals away from children with eczema helps eczema symptoms.

Some research has shown that being in contact with family pets early in a child's life might help to prevent eczema.^[91] This might be because animals bring dirt or other

Eczema

allergens into the house, which help to boost your child's immune system . Or it might just be that families with allergies are less likely to own pets.

How does it work?

Some people think that allergies to animals can make eczema worse. ^[20] If that's true, avoiding contact with animals should help symptoms to improve.

Can it be harmful?

There is no evidence that avoiding animals is harmful.

How good is the research on avoiding animals?

We couldn't find any studies that looked at the effects of animals on eczema symptoms. Based on observation, some people think it's possible that children who have pets are more likely to get eczema than children who don't have pets.

But some research has hinted that being in contact with family pets early in a child's life could help to prevent eczema. ^[91] This might be because animals bring dirt or other allergens into the house, which helps to boost your child's immune system . Or it might just be that families with allergies are less likely to own pets.

Changing what you or your child eats

In this section

[Does it work?](#)

[What is it?](#)

[How can it help?](#)

[How does it work?](#)

[Can it be harmful?](#)

[How good is the research on changing what you or your child eats?](#)

This information is for people who have eczema. It tells you about changing what you or your child eats, a self-care treatment used for eczema. It is based on the best and most up-to-date research.

Does it work?

We're not sure. Some doctors think that cutting out certain foods can help relieve your or your child's eczema symptoms. We need a lot more research before we can know for certain.

Making big changes to what you eat can be a hard thing to do. It may also make it harder to get a balanced diet with all the nutrients you need. It's a good idea to talk to a doctor or dietitian before making changes to your or your child's diet. Food allergies should be properly diagnosed by a doctor.

What is it?

When some people who have eczema eat certain foods, they have an allergic reaction. Their eczema flares up. These people seem to be allergic to particular foods. The foods that cause most allergic reactions in young children are eggs, cow's milk, fish, peanuts, soya, and wheat.^[92] ^[8] However, this is not a common cause of eczema.

Some doctors think that if you take foods that cause allergies out of your own or your child's diet, your or your child's eczema will get better.^[79]

The problem is that working out which food you or your child is allergic to can be very hard to do. It's especially hard because other things can also cause allergic reactions, like pollen and dust.^[8] Researchers also think that fewer than 1 in 10 children with eczema have a true food allergy.^[2]

The allergy tests we have now aren't very reliable. So your doctor may only advise you to give up foods if you notice that a certain food makes your eczema worse.^[8]

Here are some of the changes in diet people have tried for eczema (remember that we don't know whether any of these things work):

- Cutting out egg and cow's milk from your or your child's diet
- Cutting out all foods apart from a few, such as lamb, carrots, and rice (this is called a 'few foods' diet)

How can it help?

We don't know if any change in your or your child's diet can help. There hasn't been enough research. Here's what we do know.

Cutting out egg and cow's milk

One small study found that the eczema symptoms in babies allergic to cow's milk are more likely to improve if they aren't given cow's milk.^[93] But there's no evidence that cutting out eggs or cow's milk helps relieve symptoms in other people who have eczema. Another study looked at babies whose family members previously had problems with allergies, to see if using a baby formula where the milk proteins had been partly broken down (hydrolysed), or using a soya-based formula, would lead to fewer symptoms of eczema and food allergy as they grew older. However, up to two years of age there was no difference in symptoms between the babies who had been given the hydrolysed or soya formulas and those given a standard cow's milk formula.^[94]

Changing to a 'few foods' diet

There's no good evidence that changing to a diet that includes just a handful of simple foods can help relieve the symptoms of eczema.

How does it work?

Some doctors think that food allergies may cause eczema in some people. If that's true, people with eczema who are allergic to a food should get better if they stop eating that food. ^[92] ^[8] But there's no good evidence these diets work.

Can it be harmful?

In the studies we looked at, giving up certain foods didn't cause any harmful effects. However, a diet that isn't balanced can be harmful. For example, children on dairy-free diets may not get enough calcium, protein, and energy. These nutrients are particularly important for growing children, who need plenty of nutrients to build strong bones and to fuel their growing brains. If children don't get enough energy from their diet, they may find it hard to learn at school, or to take part in physical activities.

Adults can have trouble, too, if their diet doesn't give them the vitamins, minerals, and other things they need. That's why it's important to talk to your doctor or a dietitian before you change your own or your child's diet.

How good is the research on changing what you or your child eats?

There hasn't been much research on whether changing your or your child's diet helps relieve eczema symptoms. Here is the research we found on these treatments.

Cutting out egg and cow's milk

We found one summary of the evidence (a **systematic review**). ^[95] But only one of the studies in the review was well designed. The study found that cutting out cow's milk was unlikely to make a difference, while cutting out eggs might help. ^[96] However, there is too little evidence overall to rely on these results.

Taking supplements that contain 'friendly' bacteria (probiotics)

Changing to a 'few foods' diet

(In a 'few foods diet' all foods apart from a few, such as lamb, carrots, and rice are cut out.)

We found no good-quality studies that looked at the 'few foods' diet.

Reducing levels of house dust mites

In this section

[Does it work?](#)

[What is it?](#)

[How can it help?](#)

[How does it work?](#)

[Can it be harmful?](#)

[How good is the research on reducing the levels of house dust mites?](#)

Eczema

This information is for people who have eczema. It tells you about reducing levels of house dust mites, a self-care treatment used for eczema. It is based on the best and most up-to-date research.

Does it work?

We don't know. Some doctors think that getting rid of house dust mites can help your or your child's eczema. But there's no good evidence to show that it works. Also, it can be hard work to keep the level of mites down.

What is it?

There are lots of things you can do to control the amount of house dust mites in your home: ^[50] ^[20] ^[24]

- Replace feather pillows and duvets with synthetic ones.
- Use cotton sheets, pillow cases and duvet covers where possible. Wash them weekly at 50 degrees Celsius.
- Vacuum carpets daily if possible. Better still, have vinyl flooring or floorboards.
- Wipe any surfaces that collect dust with a damp cloth.
- Wash your child's soft toys regularly.
- Air out the bed and bedroom during the day.
- Vacuum the mattress every week (with an ordinary cleaner).
- Use special covers on the bed to keep house dust mites in the mattress from getting to the skin.

Some people think it helps to use insecticide sprays to kill mites. But experts can't agree about whether killing mites with sprays works because the dead mites and their droppings are left, and they can cause an allergic reaction. ^[50]

Because so many people are allergic to house dust mites, many doctors believe that controlling mites could help keep eczema from flaring up. ^[20]

Doctors usually only advise parents to try controlling house dust mites if their child's eczema is very bad. But if you think it might help your child, talk with your doctor about what you can do. ^[24]

How can it help?

We don't know if reducing the level of house dust mites in your home can help. It may do, and some doctors think that it does work. But there isn't any good evidence to show that it helps the symptoms of eczema.

How does it work?

House dust mites live in most homes in the UK, so everyone comes into contact with them. Tests show that 3 in 10 people are allergic to at least one species of house dust mite. These allergies are linked to several diseases, including eczema. This is why doctors think that keeping house dust mites away from the skin of people who have eczema may help. ^[50] ^[97]

Can it be harmful?

We found no information about side effects from controlling house dust mites.

How good is the research on reducing the levels of house dust mites?

There isn't any good evidence that reducing the amount of house dust mites in your home will help relieve your or your child's eczema symptoms.

We found only one good-quality study (called a **randomised controlled trial**) of 700 newborn babies. The babies were split into three groups. Babies in the first group slept on a special mattress cover. Parents of the babies in the second and third groups were either given instructions on how to avoid **allergens** or given general information about allergies. But the study found that the mattress cover made no difference to the number of babies who went on to get eczema. ^[98]

Alternative treatments

In this section

[Do they work?](#)

[What are they?](#)

[How can they help?](#)

[Can they be harmful?](#)

This information is for people who have eczema. It tells you about alternative treatments sometimes used for eczema.

Do they work?

We have not looked at the following treatments in the same detail as other treatments for eczema. (See Our method.) But we wanted to cover these treatments because many people are interested in them.

What are they?

There are a number of alternative treatments that people use for treating the symptoms of eczema. It's important to talk to your doctor before using alternative treatments for eczema, especially herbal medicines. They might react with the medications you use for eczema.

Chinese herbal medicine

In Chinese herbal medicine, plants and sometimes minerals and substances from animals are combined to make special teas, tablets, or mixtures that are put on the skin. The combinations of ingredients depend on a person's symptoms. Some of these combinations may help control an overactive immune system and reduce inflammation of the skin.

Massage

If you have a massage, a therapist uses his or her hands to relax any tension in your muscles.

Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy means massaging a person's skin with oils (called essential oils) that come from strong-smelling (aromatic) plants.

Hypnotherapy and biofeedback

Although eczema is not caused by stress, many people think that stress, anger, and frustration can make symptoms worse.^[13] ^[8] Feeling stressed about things such as problems in relationships can trigger eczema flare-ups.^[8]

Also, when someone itches just about all the time, they can get into the habit of scratching. Scratching can make eczema much worse, so it's important to break that habit. Hypnotherapy and biofeedback aim to reduce stress and also break habits that make eczema worse, such as scratching.

Hypnotherapy is a kind of 'talking' therapy. The therapist, called a hypnotherapist, helps you to become deeply relaxed. Then the therapist makes helpful suggestions. The suggestions might be aimed at getting you to stop scratching, feel more confident, or feel less stressed. Or the therapist may give you ideas to help you stay calm and solve problems when you feel overwhelmed.

The therapist might show you how to use a device that measures signals from your body. The device could show how fast your heart is beating, how fast you're breathing, or how tense your muscles are. The information you get from the device is called 'biofeedback', which means that it's feedback from your own body. It lets you see how the signals change when you do things such as change your posture or slow down your breathing. The idea is that you can learn to sense the messages from your body without the device and learn how to control the way you respond to stress.

How can they help?

This is what we know about the different types of alternative therapies.

Chinese herbal medicine

We found one big summary of the research that looked at 28 studies of Chinese herbal medicine.^[99] Most of the studies found that children and adults who used Chinese medicines had more improvement in their eczema than those who used a different type of treatment or a dummy treatment (a placebo). But the studies had problems that make their findings less reliable. More research is needed to know whether Chinese herbal medicine can help treat eczema or not.

Massage

In one small study, massage helped children with eczema to cope better with their illness. It also helped them feel less anxious.^[100] But more studies are needed to know for sure whether massage helps relieve eczema.

Aromatherapy

We found one small study that looked at children who had eczema. Half the children were given counselling and an aromatherapy massage, and half received counselling and a massage with plain oil (not aromatic essential oil).

Counselling and massage helped to improve eczema symptoms and sleep, and the results were the same whether the massage was with aromatherapy oil or plain oil.^[101] We need more studies to know whether aromatherapy can help people with eczema.

Hypnotherapy and biofeedback

In one small study, patients with eczema received both hypnotherapy and biofeedback. The treatment seemed to reduce skin damage and thickening, but not redness.^[102] But the study was poorly done, so the results aren't reliable.

Can they be harmful?

This is what we know about side-effects from alternative treatments.

Chinese herbal medicine

It's important to bear in mind that herbal medicines are medicines. Like other medicines they can have side effects or react with drugs you might be taking.

In the past, some traditional Chinese medicines that have been on the UK market have been found to contain dangerous or illegal ingredients. A government report on the safety of herbal remedies found that some of these medicines are of poor quality.^[103]

It's important to talk to your doctor or pharmacist if you wish to try a herbal remedy, especially if you are taking other medicine.

Massage

We don't have any information about side effects from massage for people with eczema.

Aromatherapy

We didn't find enough evidence to talk about harms from aromatherapy for people with eczema. But some people may find certain aromatherapy oils irritate their skin.

Hypnotherapy and biofeedback

We don't have any information about side effects from hypnotherapy and biofeedback.

Probiotics or prebiotics to prevent eczema

In this section

[Does it work?](#)

[What is it?](#)

[How can it help?](#)

[How does it work?](#)

[Can it be harmful?](#)

[How good is the research on probiotics or prebiotics to prevent eczema?](#)

This information is for people who have eczema. It tells you about probiotics and prebiotics, treatments used for preventing eczema. It is based on the best and most up-to-date research.

Does it work?

It may work. Eating foods or taking supplements that contain probiotics or prebiotics in the last few weeks of pregnancy, or giving them to your baby, might reduce the chances of your child getting eczema.

What is it?

Everyone has bacteria in their gut. Some bacteria help you to digest food and kill other bacteria that are harmful. You can eat foods or take supplements that contain these 'friendly' bacteria or encourage them to grow. These are called **probiotics** or **prebiotics**.

- Probiotics are live bacteria that occur naturally or are added to yoghurts, milk, some soya drinks and other foods. You can also buy them as supplements, which come in the form of tablets or capsules. ^[104]
- Prebiotics are foods that encourage the growth of healthy bacteria. ^[105] They don't contain live bacteria in the same way probiotics do. In some studies, babies were given prebiotics in formula milk.

Some doctors think that probiotics and prebiotics may help our **immune system** to develop.

How can it help?

Taking probiotics in the last weeks of pregnancy, and giving them to the baby in the first year of life, may reduce the chances of the baby getting eczema, especially in families where eczema is common. But it doesn't cut the risk out altogether.

One summary of the research showed that the chances of a baby having eczema at the age of 2 dropped from 35 in 100 for babies who didn't have probiotics, to 29 in 100 for babies who did have probiotics. ^[106]

But taking probiotics doesn't seem to help once children have eczema.

How does it work?

The theory is that probiotics or prebiotics help our immune system to develop naturally and prevent babies becoming allergic to things later in life.

Some doctors think that the earlier the baby comes in contact with 'friendly' bacteria the better the immune system will develop in the long term. ^[107]

Can it be harmful?

None of the studies mentioned any harmful effects.

How good is the research on probiotics or prebiotics to prevent eczema?

We found one summary of the evidence (a systematic review) that looked at six studies, including more than 2,000 babies. Not all of the studies in the summary showed that probiotics worked, but when the researchers put all the results together, probiotics worked better than a dummy (placebo) treatment. ^[106]

There are lots of different probiotics and prebiotics. It's possible that some work but not others. ^[108]

Long-term breastfeeding for infants

In this section

[Does it work?](#)

[What is it?](#)

[How can it help?](#)

[How does it work?](#)

[Can it be harmful?](#)

[How good is the research on long-term breastfeeding for infants?](#)

This information is for people who have eczema. It tells you about long-term breastfeeding for infants at high risk, a treatment used for preventing eczema. It is based on the best and most up-to-date research.

Does it work?

We're not sure. There isn't any good evidence to show that you can prevent your baby getting eczema by breastfeeding for at least three months. We need more research to be certain.

What is it?

Some people are allergic to certain foods. Doctors think there may be a link between these food allergies and eczema flare-ups in some people. ^[92]

Some specialists think that children are more likely to develop allergies to some foods if they eat these foods when they are very young babies. And if they develop allergies, that could trigger eczema or affect how it develops later. ^[109]

These experts believe that if mothers only feed their babies breast milk, it may prevent some children from getting eczema. They also say that it is better to breastfeed for five months or more, rather than for just a month or two.

How can it help?

There isn't any good evidence to show that feeding your baby only on breast milk for a several months reduces their chances of getting eczema.

How does it work?

Some doctors think that babies can become oversensitive to some foods when they are very young. They believe that feeding babies just with breast milk protects them against substances that can cause an allergy. ^[109] They can't explain why this should happen.

Can it be harmful?

We found no reports that breastfeeding for a long time causes side effects.

How good is the research on long-term breastfeeding for infants?

We didn't find any good-quality studies that have looked at long-term breastfeeding to prevent eczema.

Watching what you eat while you're pregnant

In this section

[Does it work?](#)

[What is it?](#)

[How can it help?](#)

[How does it work?](#)

[Can it be harmful?](#)

[How good is the research on watching what you eat while you're pregnant?](#)

Eczema

This information is for people who have eczema. It tells you about watching what you eat while you're pregnant, a treatment used for preventing eczema. It is based on the best and most up-to-date research.

Does it work?

It doesn't seem to work. Being careful about what you eat during pregnancy doesn't seem to help prevent eczema in babies who are at risk of developing it.

What is it?

Many people are allergic to some foods. And many people think that there could be a link between food allergies and eczema flare-ups in some people. Milk, eggs, citrus fruits, chocolate, colourings and peanuts cause the most allergic reactions in young children. ^[92] ^[20] Things (including foods) that cause allergies are called **allergens**.

In some people who have eczema, food allergens seem to trigger symptoms. Some doctors believe that if you think your child is allergic to a food, then taking that food out of the child's diet may help relieve eczema symptoms. ^[92] This is called 'dietary manipulation'. (See [Changing what you or your child eats](#) for more information.)

Some specialists also think that unborn babies should avoid these allergens. This means that the mother avoids suspected allergens in her diet while she's pregnant. ^[110]

In one of the studies that we found, pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers were advised to avoid all milk. In another study, they were advised not to eat any dairy products, milk, eggs, fish, beef, or peanuts. ^[110]

How can it help?

It probably doesn't help. The research we found showed that avoiding certain foods while you're pregnant won't protect your baby from getting eczema. ^[110]

How does it work?

Some doctors believe that because some children are allergic to certain foods, those foods can cause eczema. ^[20] ^[111]

It's possible for allergens to pass from a mother to her baby while the baby is still in the womb. ^[110] People used to think that if pregnant women avoided certain foods, they could help protect their babies from getting food allergies and eczema. But there's no good research to show that this can happen.

Can it be harmful?

The research shows that women who controlled their diet and avoided certain foods when they were pregnant had smaller babies than women who ate a normal diet. The

babies were 3 percent smaller than the babies of mothers who ate a normal diet. We don't know whether the lower birth weight had any long term effects for the baby. ^[110]

How good is the research on watching what you eat while you're pregnant?

A big review of the research (called a [systematic review](#)) found that controlling what women eat while they're pregnant doesn't protect children from eczema. ^[110]

Watching what you eat when breastfeeding

In this section

[Does it work?](#)

[What is it?](#)

[How can it help?](#)

[How does it work?](#)

[Can it be harmful?](#)

[How good is the research on watching what you eat while you're breastfeeding?](#)

This information is for people who have eczema. It tells you about watching what you eat when breastfeeding, a treatment used for preventing eczema. It is based on the best and most up-to-date research.

Does it work?

We don't know for certain. If eczema runs in your family, watching what you eat when you're breastfeeding could prevent your child getting eczema. But we need more research before we can be sure.

What is it?

Many people are [allergic](#) to some foods. And many people think that there could be a link between food allergies and eczema flare-ups in some people. Milk, eggs, citrus fruits (including juice), chocolate, colourings, and peanuts cause the most allergic reactions in young children. ^[92] ^[20] Things (including foods) that cause allergies are called **allergens**.

In some people who have eczema, food allergens seem to trigger symptoms. Some doctors believe that if you think your child is allergic to a food, then taking that food out of the child's diet may help relieve eczema symptoms. ^[92] This is called 'dietary manipulation'. (See [Changing what you or your child eats](#) for more information.)

Some specialists also think that very young babies should avoid these allergens. This means that the mother avoids suspected allergens in her diet while she's breastfeeding the baby. ^[112]

In one of the studies that we found, pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers were advised to avoid all milk. In another study, they were advised not to eat any dairy products, milk, eggs, fish, beef, or peanuts. ^[112]

How can it help?

If people in your family have eczema (or if they have [asthma](#) or [hay fever](#)), your child is at risk of getting eczema, too.

One study found that if you avoid milk when you're pregnant and breastfeeding then your baby is less likely to get eczema in the first 12 to 18 months of his or her life. ^[113] But many other studies found that avoiding certain foods makes no difference to whether a child gets eczema. ^[112]

How does it work?

Some doctors believe that because some children are allergic to certain foods, those foods can cause eczema. ^[20] ^[111]

The thinking is that when babies are very young, they can become oversensitive to some foods. ^[109]

If that's true, a mother who doesn't eat these foods while she's breastfeeding may be able to prevent her child from becoming allergic to them. ^[112]

Can it be harmful?

We found no evidence of any harms from women avoiding certain foods while they're breastfeeding.

How good is the research on watching what you eat while you're breastfeeding?

There isn't good evidence that avoiding certain foods during pregnancy helps protect children from eczema. We found one big summary of the research (called a [systematic review](#)) that looked at the results from three studies. One of these studies found: ^[114] ^[115]

- Only 2 in 10 of the children born to mothers who avoided milk while pregnant and breastfeeding went on to get eczema
- 4 in 10 of the children born to mothers who ate an unrestricted diet went on to get eczema.

The other studies in this summary weren't well designed so their results are not reliable. We need more research before we can know for certain if you can prevent eczema in this way.

Further informations:

Infections and eczema

If skin gets very dry and broken, it can easily become infected with germs called bacteria.

It's important to recognise an infection early so that it can be treated quickly.^[8] If it's not treated, it can get worse and spread.

Infections often start where your or your child's skin touches skin, for example under the arm or in the groin.^[4] It's good to check those areas regularly.

Some symptoms that can mean you have an infection are:^[8] ^[6]

- Crusty yellow blisters
- Oozing areas of skin where blisters have burst.

Skin infections can be caused by germs called bacteria and fungi . So these sometimes need to be treated with antibiotics , which kill the the germs that caused the infection and stop it spreading.^[4] Antifungal drugs are used to treat infections caused by fungi. To learn more, see [Antibiotics and antifungals](#) .

Take extra care with cold sores

One particular infection can be very dangerous. It can be life-threatening. This infection is called **eczema herpeticum**. It's caused by the virus that causes cold sores (the herpes virus). If you have eczema, you shouldn't touch anyone who has a cold sore.^[9]

The symptoms of eczema herpeticum are clusters of blisters or sores that appear suddenly, like a rash. They fill with liquid or pus, then become raw or weepy. You may get a high temperature or feel unwell. You should see your doctor immediately if you think you or your child might have this infection.

If you get this infection, you'll probably have to take antiviral drugs and be admitted to hospital.^[4] ^[10]

Things that can trigger eczema

Certain things can trigger eczema or make it worse.

Allergens

Some people who have eczema get worse symptoms when they're in contact with certain things. Their skin gets itchy and inflamed. Things that cause these symptoms are called allergens, and the skin trouble they cause is an allergic reaction.

Here are some of the common allergens: ^[11] ^[12]

- Pollen
- House dust mites (their droppings)
- Animal skin, feathers, or fur
- Certain foods, only for some people.

Irritants

Some things can make your eczema worse. They are called irritants. Over time, you'll learn which things cause problems for you or your child. Common irritants are: ^[11]

- Certain fabrics, such as woollen or synthetic fabrics
- Rough clothing
- Some soaps
- Cosmetics or perfumes
- Detergents (washing powder or liquids, fabric softener)
- Cigarette smoke
- Solvents.

Even water can be an irritant, if you get your skin wet a lot (for example, if your job involves washing things). If your hands are often wet and you don't use a moisturiser after drying them, the skin could become dry and itchy. Then the 'itch-scratch' cycle could start. For more information, see [What is eczema?](#)

There isn't any strong scientific evidence that avoiding these irritants will make your own or your child's eczema get better. But many people find that avoiding these irritants helps their eczema.

Stress

Stress doesn't cause eczema, but stress, anger and frustration can make symptoms worse. If you've just moved to a new area or your child is having problems at school, you may notice the eczema getting worse. In adults, starting a new job or coping with the death of someone close can trigger eczema. ^[11] ^[13]

To learn more, see [What will happen to me?](#)

How eczema makes you feel

If you have eczema, it's understandable if you get upset about your condition. It can be especially hard if you feel really itchy. And sometimes you may feel bad about the way your skin looks.

Both adults and children can be upset by eczema

Parents may find it stressful to care for a child who has eczema. ^[14] If your child finds it hard not to scratch, it can wear you out to have to remind them again and again. Persuading an angry child who is sick of having eczema to use their treatments can be exhausting. ^[15]

You may have to give your child with eczema extra attention, and other children in the family may feel jealous.

Eczema can also: ^[14]

- Disrupt your sleep
- Disrupt your child's sleep and make them tired and grumpy the next day
- Disrupt school or work
- Stop a child doing their best at school
- Force you to miss work and other things because you have to go to the doctor
- Make family life stressful at times.

People with eczema, especially children, may get upset about how their skin looks. Older children especially, who are more aware of their appearance, may worry about this. And you may not be able to take part in sport such as swimming. The chlorine in swimming pools makes some people's eczema worse. Also, some people may feel too embarrassed about how their skin looks to go swimming.

Eczema

These feelings can interfere with your relationships and your social life. ^[14] ^[8] ^[6]

Talk with others who are dealing with eczema

- If you are a parent and find your child's eczema stressful, you may find it helpful to talk to other parents in a similar situation.
- If you are an older child or an adult, it can be a relief to spend time with other people who have problems like yours and who understand. You might pick up some useful tips from them or feel better just knowing that you're not the only person who finds it hard to cope.

Ask your doctor or nurse about groups in your area.

You could also contact the National Eczema Society, a charity that provides information and support for people and families affected by eczema. It also runs some local groups and campaigns for better services for people with eczema. (For more information, see <http://www.eczema.org>)

Things you can do to help

There are certain things you can do that will help your skin or your child's skin to heal and stay in good condition. This should help prevent eczema from flaring up.

Not many of these ideas have been tested in studies. But we wanted to mention them because some people have found them useful. You may wish to try them to see if they help you. ^[20] ^[11]

- Protect yourself against things that trigger eczema. When you are doing housework, watch out for substances that may make your eczema flare up. Wear gloves before touching something that you think may make eczema worse. To learn more, see [Things that can trigger eczema](#) .
- Avoid clothes made out of rough fabrics. Rough textiles can make eczema itch more.
- Try to avoid getting too hot and sweaty. The sweat can make your skin more itchy.
- Keep central heating low.
- Keep your or your child's bedroom cool.
- Don't wash with soap. Use a soap substitute such as Sebamed instead.

Eczema

- Avoid hot baths. Long warm or even cool baths seem to be better than hot baths and showers.
- Use make-up with caution.
- If your child has eczema, keep their nails short to discourage scratching. For babies you can get anti-scratch mittens.

Use plenty of moisturiser every day. This is especially important after a bath or shower. Doctors call moisturisers 'emollients'.

- Choose plain moisturisers without any fragrance or added ingredients.
- Greasy moisturisers, such as Vaseline, may be a little better than creamy ones.
- Take extra care in winter and in dry climates. You might need to use moisturiser quite often.
- Keep using a moisturiser even after your, or your child's, skin has healed.

Pimecrolimus and tacrolimus and the risk of cancer

There have been a few reports of children and adults getting cancer after using tacrolimus and pimecrolimus for eczema. Cancer has also been found in animals when these drugs were tested in higher doses than usual. ^[21]

But it's not clear whether the cancer was caused by these drugs, or whether it would have happened anyway. The European Medicines Agency says it may take years of studying the effects of pimecrolimus and tacrolimus in people with eczema before we know for certain whether there's a real risk of cancer. ^[22] So far, there have only been short-term studies, looking at people who've used these drugs for a year or two at most.

But because of the possible risk of cancer, the European Medicines Agency says: ^[22]

- You should use pimecrolimus (brand name Elidel) only if you have mild or moderate eczema, and if other treatments for eczema haven't worked or have caused too many side effects.
- You should use tacrolimus (Protopic) only if you have moderate or severe eczema, and if other treatments for eczema haven't worked or have caused too many side effects.
- Pimecrolimus and tacrolimus should be given only to adults and children over the age of 2 years.

Eczema

- You should use the smallest amounts needed to control your symptoms.
- If your symptoms go away, you should stop using these treatments.
- You should use these drugs only on the areas of your skin affected by eczema.
- People with a weak immune system (for example people with AIDS or people who have had an organ transplant) shouldn't use these drugs.
- You should use tacrolimus only once a day (if possible).

The European Medicines Agency also says you should avoid using sunbeds and going out in the sun while using pimecrolimus or tacrolimus. ^[23]

You should see your doctor if your symptoms get worse or they don't get better.

Glossary:

inflammation

Inflammation is when your skin or some other part of your body becomes red, swollen, hot, and sore. Inflammation happens because your body is trying to protect you from germs, from something that's in your body and could harm you (like a splinter) or from things that cause allergies (these things are called allergens). Inflammation is one of the ways in which your body heals an infection or an injury.

bacteria

Bacteria are tiny organisms. There are lots of different types. Some are harmful and can cause disease. But some bacteria live in your body without causing any harm.

immune system

Your immune system is made up of the parts of your body that fight infection. When bacteria or viruses get into your body, it's your immune system that kills them. Antibodies and white blood cells are part of your immune system. They travel in your blood and attack bacteria, viruses and other things that could damage your body.

allergic reaction

You have an allergic reaction when your immune system overreacts to a substance that is normally harmless. You can be allergic to particles in the air you are breathing, like pollen (which causes hay fever) or to chemicals on your skin, like detergents (which can cause a rash). People can also have an allergic reaction to drugs, like penicillin.

allergen

If you have an allergy to something, your body overreacts when you come into contact with it. The thing you are allergic to is called an allergen. Most allergens are harmless to most people. But if you're allergic to something, your body's system for fighting infection (your immune system) is too sensitive to that allergen. It triggers changes that are called allergic reactions. For example, pollen is an allergen for some people. If you're allergic to pollen, you'll sneeze and have runny eyes when pollen is in the air.

infection

You get an infection when bacteria, a fungus, or a virus get into a part of your body where it shouldn't be. For example, an infection in your nose and airways causes the common cold. An infection in your skin can cause rashes such as athlete's foot. The organisms that cause infections are so tiny that you can't see them without a microscope.

fungus

A fungus is an organism that is sometimes considered to be a type of plant. A fungus lives by feeding on other organisms. The mushrooms we eat in salads are fungi, but so are candida and cryptococcus, which can cause infections in people's bodies.

antibiotics

These medicines are used to help your immune system fight infection. There are a number of different types of antibiotics that work in different ways to get rid of bacteria, parasites, and other infectious agents. Antibiotics do not work against viruses.

high temperature

Eczema

A high temperature is a general sign that there is an infection or inflammation in your body. Temperatures vary, but anything over about 38 degrees Celsius (100 degrees Fahrenheit) is considered high.

genes

Your genes are the parts of your cells that contain instructions for how your body works. Genes are found on chromosomes, structures that sit in the nucleus at the middle of each of your cells. You have 23 pairs of chromosomes in your normal cells, each of which has thousands of genes. You get one set of chromosomes, and all of the genes that are on them, from each of your parents.

allergy

If you have an allergy to something (such as pollen or a medicine), your body always overreacts to it. The reaction happens because your immune system (your body's system for fighting infection) is too sensitive to it.

hay fever

You get hay fever when your immune system reacts too strongly to pollen or mould. Your doctor may call it seasonal allergic rhinitis. The most common symptoms are sneezing, a runny or blocked nose, and red, itchy eyes. You may also cough or wheeze.

asthma

Asthma is a disease of the lungs. It makes you wheeze, cough and feel short of breath. Asthma attacks are caused by inflammation and narrowing of your airways, which makes it hard for air to pass in and out of your lungs.

randomised controlled trials

Randomised controlled trials are medical studies designed to test whether a treatment works. Patients are split into groups. One group is given the treatment being tested (for example, an antidepressant drug) while another group (called the comparison or control group) is given an alternative treatment. This could be a different type of drug or a dummy treatment (a placebo). Researchers then compare the effects of the different treatments.

steroids

Steroids are a type of chemical. Your body naturally produces steroids, which play a part in many of its processes. For example, steroids are involved in how your immune system, reproductive system and metabolism work. Steroids can also be given as medicines and are used for a number of different conditions: including asthma, rheumatoid arthritis and eczema. Corticosteroids are not the same as the steroids used by some body builders and athletes. Those steroids are called 'anabolic steroids'.

systematic reviews

A systematic review is a thorough look through published research on a particular topic. Only studies that have been carried out to a high standard are included. A systematic review may or may not include a meta-analysis, which is when the results from individual studies are put together.

placebo

A placebo is a 'pretend' or dummy treatment that contains no active substances. A placebo is often given to half the people taking part in medical research trials, for comparison with the 'real' treatment. It is made to look and taste identical to the drug treatment being tested, so that people in the studies do not know if they are getting the placebo or the 'real' treatment. Researchers often talk about the 'placebo effect'. This is where patients feel better after having a placebo treatment because they expect to feel better. Tests may indicate that they actually are better. In the same way, people can also get side effects after having a placebo treatment. Drug treatments can also have a 'placebo effect'. This is why, to get a true picture of how well a drug works, it is important to compare it against a placebo treatment.

hormones

Hormones are chemicals that are made in certain parts of the body. They travel through the bloodstream and have an effect on other parts of the body. For example, the female sex hormone oestrogen is made in a woman's ovaries. Oestrogen has many different effects on a woman's body. It makes the breasts grow at puberty and helps control periods. It is also needed to get pregnant.

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Eczema

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