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Everything you need to know about baby eczema

Babies get all sorts of rashes and skin complaints, from nappy rash to cradle cap. Most are harmless and will disappear over time with the right care, but eczema can be a persistent problem. So what is baby eczema and how do you treat it?

Around one in five newborn babies get [eczema](#), a skin condition that usually appears as an itchy red or brown patch¹.

Dr Derrick Phillips, consultant dermatologist and [British Skin Foundation](#) spokesperson, says eczema occurs due to an impairment of the skin barrier function affecting the ability to retain moisture, leading to dryness and irritation.

"Baby [eczema](#) typically manifests as dry, red patches on the cheeks. There may be areas of broken skin and scratch marks," he says. "The presence of yellow crusting is a sign of infection and usually requires a course of cream or oral antibiotics. Over time, the eczema may spread to other areas including the torso, hands, in front of the elbows and behind the knees. [Nappy rash](#) can also develop."

Why do babies get eczema?

[Eczema](#) is a complex condition. It can be genetic, which means your baby may be more likely to have eczema if other family members have it. "It is also more common in families with a strong history of eczema, asthma, hay fever and food allergies," says Phillips.

However, eczema also involves an overactive immune response to environmental factors such as heat, soap, pollen or other irritants, which can cause flare-ups. Around half of people with eczema have an additional genetic element – a difference in a [skin](#) protein called filaggrin – which leads to further problems in the skin barrier².

What's the link between baby eczema and food allergies?

Food allergies can occur in any baby. Although babies with eczema have a slightly higher risk of allergy, lots of babies with eczema have no other food or [cow's milk](#) allergies.

Cows' milk allergy, also called cows' milk protein allergy, is a common childhood food allergy. One of the symptoms of a [cow's milk protein allergy](#) can be an itchy rash. Exposure to cow's milk may act as a trigger for eczema if a baby is allergic to it.

However, it's possible for a child to have both a cow's milk allergy and eczema as two separate conditions that need to be treated as such. If you think your baby has a [cow's milk allergy](#), you should speak to your doctor.

How can you manage baby eczema?

Baby [eczema](#) is often managed with a type of moisturiser called an emollient. "Emollients soothe the skin by producing an oily layer that traps water beneath, locking in moisture and repairing the skin barrier," says Phillips.

"Hot baths and soaps should be avoided as they strip natural oils away from the skin, causing further irritation," he adds.

"Bath oils and soap substitutes should be used instead. Bath oils are added to bath water, and both cleanse the skin and coat it with a film of oil trapping moisture beneath. Soap substitutes will cleanse the skin without causing dryness. They do not foam and will take some getting used to."

However, it is important to use bath oils or soap substitutes that are suitable for a baby's skin, which is extra sensitive.

"Some cases of baby eczema will not respond to emollients alone and will need to be managed with the assistance of your family doctor or dermatologist," says Phillips. "Short courses of low potency steroid creams may be required to soothe the [skin](#) and reduce the inflammation."

Which creams or lotions are appropriate for baby eczema?

It is important to consult your dermatologist, paediatrician or family doctor before trying new products.

Ointments are heavy greasy moisturisers and are the most effective at locking in moisture and repairing the skin barrier. "These contain less water than other types of moisturiser, and as a result contain fewer preservatives. Ointments can also be used as a barrier treatment for nappy dermatitis," says Phillips.

Creams and lotions have a higher water content than ointments, Phillips explains. This means they are absorbed more rapidly and require more frequent application.

Do babies grow out of eczema?

It is impossible to predict whether your baby will have eczema for life or not. Currently, there is no cure for eczema. [Eczema](#) is a long lasting (chronic) condition with periods of flare and periods of remission, and most people with a history of eczema still have problems with dry and itchy skin.

If your baby's eczema is weepy, has a gold crust or is hot or red, the skin may be infected and they may need [antibiotics](#).

Your doctor may refer your baby to a dermatologist if standard treatments are not working as well as they should be.

Further reading

1. [National Eczema Society: Babies and eczema.](#)
2. [National Eczema Society: Babies and eczema.](#)
3. [Allergy UK: Cow's milk allergy.](#)

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Authored by:	Peer Reviewed by: Dr Krishna Vakharia, MRCGP	
Originally Published: 20/11/2023	Next review date: 04/05/2023	Document ID: doc_32348

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