

Atopic Dermatitis

Atopic dermatitis, also known as atopic eczema, is an atopic, hereditary, and non-contagious skin disease characterized by chronic inflammation of the skin. Atopic dermatitis most often affects infants and young children, but it can continue into adulthood.

Causes:

The cause of atopic dermatitis is not known, but the disease seems to result from a combination of genetic (hereditary) and environmental factors. Atopic eczema consists of chronic inflammation; it occurs in people with a history of allergy disorders such as asthma or hay fever. In the past, it was thought that atopic dermatitis was caused by an emotional disorder. We now know that emotional factors such as stress can exacerbate, but do not cause the condition.

Symptoms:

Symptoms vary from person to person. The most common symptoms are dry, itchy skin, cracks behind the ears, and rashes on the cheeks, arms, and legs.

Treatment:

The primary treatment involves prevention, which includes avoiding or minimizing contact with (or intake of) known allergens. Once that has been established, topical treatments can be used. Topical treatments focus on reducing both the dryness and inflammation of the skin.

A high quality moisturizer should be used daily. Moisturizers should not have any ingredients that may further aggravate the condition. Moisturizers are especially effective if applied within 5-10 minutes after bathing.

Most commercial soaps wash away the oils produced by the skin that normally serve to prevent drying. Using a soap substitute such as aqueous cream helps keep the skin moisturized.

A doctor may prescribe topical steroid ointments or creams. Disadvantages of using steroid creams include stretch marks and thinning of the skin. Higher-potency steroid creams must not be used on the face or other areas where the skin is naturally thin. Along with creams, antibiotics are often prescribed if an infection is suspected.

Controlling Atopic Dermatitis

- Prevent scratching or rubbing whenever possible.
- Protect skin from excessive moisture, irritants, and rough clothing.
- Maintain a cool, stable temperature and consistent humidity levels.
- Limit exposure to dust, cigarette smoke, pollens, and animal dander.
- Recognize and limit emotional stress.