

Treatment Approaches for Atopic Dermatitis

Successful management of atopic dermatitis requires a multi-pronged approach that restores moisture to the skin, controls skin inflammation by using prescription medications and avoids triggers that cause your skin to flare. There are many different options for prescriptions to improve atopic dermatitis. Different doctors prescribe different medications and may advise slightly different skin care regimens. The major vehicles that these medications come in are topical creams and ointments. The two main types of topical therapy for reduction of skin inflammation are corticosteroids and the newer topical calcineurin inhibitors.

1) Use moisturizer all over the entire body at least twice a day.

The function of moisturizers are to keep the skin moisturized to restore the skin barrier function: Find a cream or ointment that you or your child likes - this is most important. The medicine does not do much good in the tube. The thicker the moisturizer, generally the better barrier it provides. Ointments work better than creams. Creams work better than lotions. Lotions are more useful during the summer when thick creams may be difficult to tolerate. However, lotions have a higher water content and evaporate, and can cause drying. If you put a moisturizer on the skin while the skin is damp, this is doubly effective, particularly when you use an ointment. The moisturizer provides a seal holding the water in the skin, i.e. the so-called "soak-and-seal" approach. You or your child may bathe in warm, not hot water, for short periods of time (approximately 10-20 minutes at a time) once or twice a day. Lightly pat the skin dry with a towel then, while the skin is still damp, (within 3 minutes) apply a moisturizer from head to toe. If you or your child is using a medicated cream or ointment, apply that to the rash and use the moisturizer on non-rashy or normal-looking skin.

2) Apply the prescription medication twice a day to only the red, rough areas on skin.

Put the medication on your fingers and gently rub it into the skin rash. Usually the medicine will help an area within a few days time. If you are using topical corticosteroids, try to put the medicine on for two days after you have noticed that the redness is no longer present; this will help the redness from returning. In the case of topical calcineurin inhibitors (Elidel and Protopic), it is okay to use it for up to seven days after the skin rash has disappeared.

3) Avoid triggers or irritants.

Some patients with atopic dermatitis have specific things that trigger itching and rashes, while others may have none that can be identified. It may require a little bit of trial and error to see what applies to your situation. Also, triggers can change over time.. Avoid use of fabric softeners in the washing machine or as dryer sheets. Try to use laundry detergents, soaps and shampoos that are fragrance free. You may

find that double rinsing the clothes helps. The last rinse should be detergent-free. Some children are sensitive to house dust mites and they may benefit from a plastic mattress wrap. Other children may flare when exposed to animal dander or other airborne allergens. While food allergy is more common in children with eczema, foods are specific triggers for flares in only a minority of children. If you notice that the skin flares after certain foods you can see if eliminating one food at time makes a difference, as long as your child can still enjoy a well balanced diet. If you continue to be concerned about potential allergens triggering atopic dermatitis and the picture is confusing it is best to consult a specialist who deals with allergy triggers. In some cases, infection may contribute to a flare of your atopic dermatitis and antibiotics or anti-viral medications will be needed.

4) Consider using a medication by mouth to help control the itching.

Scratching only makes the skin more reactive and the skin barrier function even more disrupted. It can cause both children and their parents to lose sleep! There are different types of anti-itch medications. Some cause more drowsiness than others. Both types are acceptable depending on your child and your preference. Start with Benadryl and if that does not work, ask for a prescription “antihistamine.” Effective control of the skin inflammation is the best treatment for itching. You should consider going to a specialist in atopic dermatitis treatment if your skin continues to be itchy or inflamed despite your best efforts.

5) Prescription creams and ointments.

- a. **Steroid creams and ointments** (generally things with “-one” on the end of the name):
The strength of the cream or ointment depends on the name of the active ingredient. The numbers at the end do not indicate the relative strength. Thus triamcinolone 0.1% ointment is much stronger than hydrocortisone 1% even though the number following the name is much lower. Topical steroids are very effective in treating atopic dermatitis. However, they can cause side effects including skin thinning or stretch marks if not used carefully under medication supervision. When used in the manner prescribed (to only rashy areas of skin and for not more than a few weeks time to any one area) they are safe. Remember that these are corticosteroids and are anti-inflammatory not “anabolic steroids” like those used illicitly by some athletes.
- b. **Topical calcineurin inhibitors:** These non-steroid creams and ointments decrease itching and redness in the skin. Since they are relatively new, they are generally used as second-line medications, though they may be used alone or in combination with topical steroids. The good thing is that they do not have some of the side effects that misuse of steroids can have (thinning of skin and stretch marks when not used properly). Names of topical calcineurin inhibitors include Elidel® cream which is FDA-approved for treating mild to moderate atopic dermatitis; and Protopic® ointment which is approved for treating moderate to severe atopic dermatitis.

6) Alternative therapies.

Wet wraps can be a huge benefit to severely dry skin or inflamed eczema. Tar products can also be helpful in some patients with atopic dermatitis. In particular, tar shampoos are often used for red, itchy scalp. If your routine treatment with creams and ointments do not work to control your atopic dermatitis, consult a specialist in atopic dermatitis to consider other treatment options. This may include light therapy, cyclosporine, and other forms of systemic therapy which are stronger may require careful supervision.