

What is Atopic Dermatitis?

Introduction

Atopic dermatitis (often called eczema) is a skin disease which causes dry sensitive skin which easily becomes red, scaly and intensely itchy. The eczema usually starts during the first two years of life, on the face, arms and legs. Later it is often seen on the creases of the elbows, backs of knees, or the wrists. In adulthood it can involve the hands or eyelids. In severe cases, the rash can cover all areas of the body.

What causes atopic dermatitis?

It is at least partly genetic and there is probably a combination of genes that are inherited in families which have children with atopic dermatitis. It is frequently seen in children of families with a history of asthma and hay fever. The main function of the skin on the body is to provide a barrier. In atopic dermatitis that barrier is not normal, and the skin becomes easily irritated. The other main function of the skin is to provide a first line of defense for the immune system to protect against infection and other environmental triggers. In atopic dermatitis, the skin immune system machinery is “hyper-excitabile” to triggers which ordinarily do not bother individuals who don't have atopic dermatitis. These triggers include irritating soaps, dust mites, pet dander, foods, and infection. If you combine hyper-excitability of the skin with an inadequate skin barrier you get a rash and itching.

How is atopic dermatitis diagnosed?

Diagnosis is made by the clinical features associated with this skin condition. That would include a recurring rash which is associated with marked itching and a typical appearance and location to the skin rash on the body. There is no blood test that can be done that would label your child with this condition. Skin biopsy is occasionally done to confirm the diagnosis but is only required in some cases if the presentation is not typical and other causes of eczema need to be ruled out.

How can atopic dermatitis be prevented from showing up?

- Keep the skin well moisturized.
- Avoid irritants and other triggers.
- Use prescribed medicines when there are red, itchy or irritated areas to help the skin to return to normal as quickly as possible.
- Try to avoid scratching.

If everything is being done as it should, why can the dermatitis keep flaring?

If you keep the skin well moisturized, and avoid coming in contact with things you know irritate your child's skin, there will be less flares. However, some flares of atopic dermatitis are beyond your control. Tell your doctor if flares are still a regular occurrence so that he/she can consider other options for your child.

What are the triggers of atopic dermatitis?

- Triggers are different for different people. Most commonly the triggers are:
- Heat and sweat for some individuals; cold weather or changes in humidity for others
- House dust mites, pet fur, pollen, molds
- Certain foods in some children (most commonly egg, milk, peanut, soy and wheat)
- Bacterial or viral infection
- Wool, acrylic, synthetic fabrics like nylon; especially coarse-feeling garments
- Tobacco smoke
- Fragrances in: shampoos, soaps, laundry detergents, fabric softeners.
- Repeated exposure to water without moisturization
- Stress

Can atopic dermatitis be outgrown?

Most children do outgrow the condition. However, some adults will continue to have atopic dermatitis. Hand and face or eyelid dermatitis is a common form of eczema in adults. Almost all patients will continue to have sensitive skin into adulthood.