



Eczema

Eczema is a common skin condition characterized by an itchy, red rash. The rash may come and go. Various triggers may worsen it - stress, cold weather, frequent bathing, etc.. Usually eczema is treated with powerful topical steroids - these may cause many side effects with long term use and **natural treatment** allows many people to lessen or even avoid the use of these potent medications.

Dietary manipulation:

Eczema may be triggered by **allergies**, and is more common in people with other allergic disorders like asthma.^{1 2} Searching for a cause may require some serious detective work, but this may pay off big once the trigger for the allergy has been identified - avoidance of the allergen can lead to significant health improvement.³

When heavy coffee drinkers with eczema avoided their favorite beverage, eczema symptoms were reported to improve.⁴ In this study, the reaction was to coffee - not caffeine. Using a hypoallergenic diet to investigate **food allergies** may be useful to check into other sources of allergy.

Nutritional supplements:

Essential Fatty Acids - People with eczema do not have the normal ability to process fatty acids, especially essential fatty acids (EFA's). They are "essential" because we must have them in our diet, they cannot be made by our body. This can result in a deficiency of gamma-linolenic acid (GLA), one of the essential fatty acids.⁵ GLA is found in evening primrose oil (EPO), borage oil, and black currant seed oil. Most double-blind research has shown that EPO overcomes this block and is useful in the treatment of eczema.^{6 7 8} The effects for reduced itching are usually most striking.⁹ Much of the research uses 12 pills per day; each pill containing 500 mg of EPO, of which 45 mg is GLA. One study questioned the effectiveness of evening primrose oil for eczema;¹⁰ however, this negative study has been criticized.¹¹ Consistent, reproducible problems from taking evening primrose oil have not been reported, and it is safe to use long term. EFA's seem to have their effect mostly through their anti-inflammatory properties - they enter the same anti-inflammation pathway as the arthritis medications. They benefit not only skin conditions, but also asthma and arthritis!

Soy - The addition of soy to the diet is also very beneficial for the management of eczema. Soy also has a wonderful anti - inflammatory effect because soy "fat" is about 50 percent linoleic acid, **another Essential Fatty Acid**. A great supplement - you need 30-50 mg of soy per day.

Fish Oil - ten grams of fish oil providing 1.8 grams of EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) per day were given to a group of eczema sufferers in a double-blind trial. After twelve weeks, those using the fish oil experienced significant improvement.¹⁴ According to the researchers, fish oil may be effective because it reduces levels of leukotriene B4, a substance that has been linked to eczema.¹⁵ The eczema-relieving effects of fish oil may require taking very large doses. A nutritionally oriented doctor should be consulted before long-term use of more than 3–4 grams of fish oil is contemplated, because a high intake has been reported to sometimes elevate blood sugar, cholesterol, and glucose levels. Side effects from fish oil include nose bleeds (because of reduced blood clotting), gastrointestinal upset, and "fishy" burps.

Vitamin E - 400 IU per day has been reported to alleviate eczema,¹⁶ however no formal study has investigated this effect. Vitamin E toxicity is very rare and supplements are widely considered to be safe, yet doses over 800 IU may increase bleeding time. Caution must be exercised by people on other blood thinning medications (Coumadin) or supplements (Ginkgo, Fish oil, etc.).

Vitamin C - In 1989, Medical World News reported that researchers from the University of Texas found that vitamin C, at 50–75 mg per 2.2 pounds of body weight, reduced symptoms of eczema in a double-blind trial.¹⁷ Vitamin C may be beneficial in eczema by affecting the immune system. Some individuals develop diarrhea after as little as a few thousand milligrams of vitamin C per day, while others are not bothered by ten times this amount. However, high levels of vitamin C can deplete the body of copper,¹⁸ an essential nutrient. It is prudent to ensure adequate copper intake at higher intakes of vitamin C (copper is found in many multivitamin/mineral supplements).

Herbs that may be helpful:

Licorice root, used either internally or topically, may help alleviate symptoms of eczema. A traditional Chinese herbal preparation, which includes licorice, has been successful in treating childhood and adult eczema. The product, known as Zemaphyte, is currently under investigation in England. One or two packets of the combination is mixed in hot water and taken once per day.^{19 20} Topically, glycyrrhetic acid, a constituent of licorice root, reduces the inflammation and itching associated with eczema.²¹

Sarsaparilla may be beneficial as an anti-inflammatory.

Western Medicine Offerings

The most commonly prescribed treatments are topical steroid medications. These help while being used, but the eczema flairs again after a time off of these topical anti-inflammatory medications. Dry Skin care is essential, especially in dry climates or in the winter months – see our Dry Skin care article for suggestions.

Newer topical choices for treatment include tacrolimus and pimecrolimus. These do not carry the long-term side effects of skin thinning or atrophy which may occur when potent topical steroids are used over longer time periods.

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