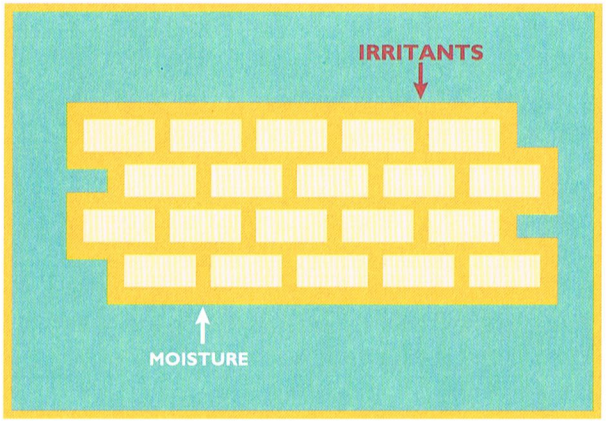
HEALTHY SKIN



In healthy skin, moisturising factors help skin cells swell and fats and oils fill spaces between plump skin cells to form a natural skin barrier – keeping moisture in and irritants out.

Skin cells and the surrounding fats and oils are often shown as a brick wall. The skin cells are the 'bricks' and the fats and oils the 'mortar'.

What causes inflammation?

If irritants cross the skin barrier the skin reacts causing inflammation. This is the body's natural defence system to protect against its enemies (irritants and bacteria).

In atopic eczema, the body can overreact and 'flare up' in response to irritants and bacteria which would usually be harmless.

INFORMATION ABOUT ECZEMA ACCREDITED BY THE

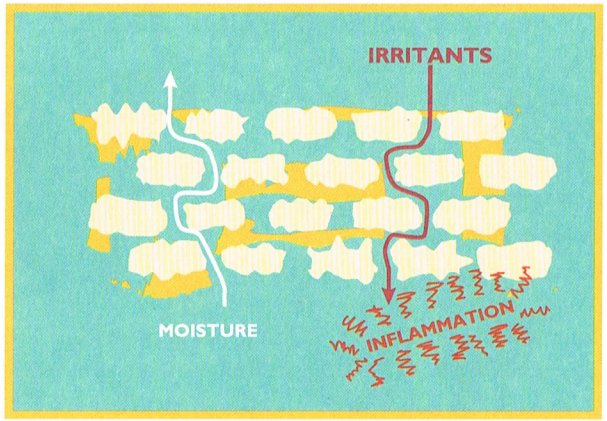
NATIONAL ECZEMA SOCIETY

Registered Charity: England and Wales (No.1009671) and Scotland (No.SCO43669)

www.eczema.org

The National Eczema Society does not recommend or endorse any specific product or treatment.

ECZEMA – A DAMAGED SKIN BARRIER



In atopic eczema there is a shortage of fats and oils surrounding the skin cells. The skin cells shrink, opening cracks which allow moisture to escape quickly and irritants to enter.

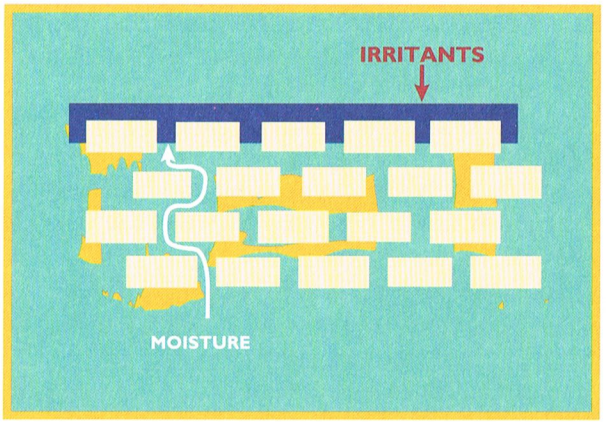
The skin reacts causing redness, inflammation and is very itchy. Scratching damages the skin further. This leads to more irritation, itching and further scratching.

Reducing inflammation

When the skin 'flares up', emollients with additional action, or additional treatments can be used (e.g. topical steroids), to reduce the inflammation and redness. Continue using emollients when the eczema flares as they will help the other eczema treatments, apply them alternately, but leave sufficient time to allow the first cream, gel or ointment to soak in.

If the skin is red and itchy it may be due to the reaction of the skin to bacteria e.g. *Staph aureus* which is more common on atopic skin. The doctor may prescribe a treatment to reduce the number of these bacteria and help remove the cause of irritation.

RESTORING THE SKIN BARRIER USING AN EMOLLIENT*



Emollients rehydrate dry skin by forming a layer of oil which traps moisture in the skin allowing cells to swell and close the cracks.

Emollients should be applied at least twice a day, or more frequently if needed, in large amounts to moisturise and soften the skin. This makes the skin supple and less itchy. It is important to continue using emollients even when the skin appears to be better.

*Emollients are medical moisturisers that can be prescribed by a doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

Avoiding irritants

There are many factors in the environment that can make eczema worse, some only apply to certain individuals but common ones include soap, detergents, changes in temperature and dust.

More information about eczema is given overleaf with some helpful suggestions about avoiding irritants or trigger factors that can make eczema worse.

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ATOPIC ECZEMA

About 1 in 5 children in the UK has atopic eczema. It commonly starts in babies aged 3-6 months, but can start earlier or later.

For many children eczema largely resolves as they get older, but their skin can continue to be sensitive. Some people continue to have atopic eczema as adults; but there are many ways to help manage the condition.

In atopic eczema there is a deficiency of the natural protective skin barrier. It has fewer fats, oils and other moisturising factors that help to retain moisture.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

The skin can become dry, cracked, red and sore. Eczema can be confined to small patches or affect the whole body. It may come and go or be relatively persistent.

The skin is also very itchy – the main symptom of eczema – which leads to scratching, further damaging the skin.

When skin becomes dry, it has less protection against irritant trigger factors. Common examples include detergents, soaps, chemicals and bacteria such as *Staph. aureus,* which can make the itchy eczema worse. Also, the skin can become infected more easily, particularly when damaged by scratching.

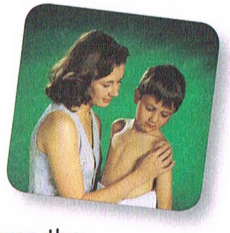
Young children find it difficult to resist the urge to scratch. Keeping finger nails short will help to minimise damage to the skin, and anti-scratch mittens are useful for babies.

Pinching or pressing the skin is less damaging than scratching and distracting your child can help.

Symptoms can be seasonal, either improving during the summer months and getting worse in the winter, or vice versa.

GOOD SKIN CARE

ESTABLISH A DAILY EMOLLIENT REGIME



Use emollients as often as possible – this is the most important part of skin care.

Emollients help to rehydrate and soften the skin making it smooth and supple.

Improving the condition of the skin by regular emollient use restores the skin barrier and reduces itching; this may help your eczema flares to be less frequent.

Even when the skin looks and feels 'normal', emollients should be continued and used regularly.

Emollients are available as lotions, creams, gels and ointments. Lotions are lighter than creams and gels, and ointments are greasier.

It is important to find the emollient(s) that suits each individual and that they want to use – you may sometimes need more than one.

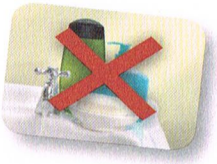
Make a note of where, how often and how much emollient to apply.

IMPORTANT SAFETY INFORMATION

Paraffin is a common, important and very effective ingredient in emollient products applied to the skin. However, care should be taken as emollients which soak into medical dressings or fabrics (clothing, pyjamas, bed linen, etc.) can increase the flammability of these items. Patients using emollients (and their parents/carers) should take particular care to avoid these materials coming into contact with naked flames or lit cigarettes, etc. As a precaution, dressings and clothing, etc., should be changed frequently and laundered thoroughly.

Ask your doctor, nurse, health visitor or local pharmacist for advice.

AVOID SOAP AND FOAMING BATH/SHOWER PRODUCTS



Don't use soaps, bubble baths or foaming shower gels, which tend to dry and irritate the skin. If it bubbles or foams it dries the skin. Use an emollient soap substitute for washing in the bath, under the shower or at the sink – it does not need to lather. Bathing keeps the skin clean and free from scales and crusts but can be drying. Many people find it valuable to use an emollient bath additive that is designed to disperse efficiently in water.

Wash with lukewarm water rather than hot water.

OTHER HELPFUL HINTS

- ✓ Avoid having the central heating too high
- ✓ A simple humidifier can make the air less dry
- ✓ Air the rooms daily
- ✓ Use a damp cloth when dusting
- ✓ Vacuum carpets regularly
- ✓ Use covers on mattresses, pillows and duvets and avoid feathers
- ✓ Wear cotton or silk clothing rather than wool next to the skin
- ✓ Use non-biological washing powder
  NB. Washing at a temperature of 60°C or higher will kill house dust mites
- ✓ Wash and wipe toys regularly
  NB. Soft toys in a plastic bag and kept in the freezer overnight kills house dust mites
- ✓ Do not mow the lawn while your child is nearby
- ✓ Know your trigger factors and try to reduce contact with anything that may cause your eczema to flare e.g. furry pets, detergents, chemicals, house dust or house dust mites