



Health Notes

from the Lilydale Pharmacy

Eczema and dermatitis

Eczema and dermatitis are two general terms, which mean very much the same thing – inflammation of the skin. Medically speaking there are two major forms of eczema: contact eczema and atopic eczema. As the name suggests, contact eczema results from direct contact with an irritant substance – often a chemical substance such as detergent, shampoo, cosmetics or the metal in jewellery. Redness, minor swelling, oozing and itching might all be features of contact eczema.

The cause of atopic eczema is not so easy to define. It tends to occur in families and is more likely to affect people who also have asthma or hayfever. Babies and children often have atopic eczema. Atopic eczema may be made worse by stress. Sometimes, it may be itchy, red and inflamed with small weeping blisters; sometimes it may be dry and scaly, usually in the creases of the elbows, knees and wrists.

In fact when the skin becomes dry the irritation from all causes of skin rash seems to be so much worse. As a general rule, we tend to spend too much time in the bath or shower; we have the water too hot and we use soaps, which are too harsh.

If you have eczema or dermatitis, avoid the use of soaps altogether; use soap substitutes such as Hamilton Wash or QV Wash. Regularly apply simple moisturising creams such as sorbolene cream, aqueous cream or the specially formulated QV cream.

The addition of tar or oatmeal products (like Pinetarsol and Dermaveen) to the bath will help relieve the itch and irritation. Hydrocortisone cream (such as Dermaid), which is now available without prescription, effectively reduces the swelling and redness as well as the itch.

If your skin is extra sensitive to chemicals, use cotton gloves next to the skin, and then rubber or vinyl gloves over the top, when washing or during housework. Once the rash is under control, the application of a barrier cream (such as NS 5) will help prevent its recurrence.

There are many creams and ointments that can be used for eczema and dermatitis, but the most important thing you can do for your skin is to avoid soap and water. Washing needs to be not too long; not too hot; not too often; and use soap substitute. If you shower every day – try to make it every second day.

Older people often have dermatitis due to the skin becoming thinner and drying out. Whatever the reason – the treatment is the same. Avoid all soaps. There is no such thing as a gentle soap, so use a soap substitute. Soap substitutes don't lather, but they clean very well.

If your skin is dry and scaly, an ointment is usually better than a cream.

There are many other skin problems including infections that can look like eczema or dermatitis. Serious illness can sometimes first appear as a rash. If you are unsure, please seek medical advice.

High quality online information about a wide range of skin problems can be found at: www.dermnetnz.org