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Eczema in the classroom



Over one million children affected by eczema will be heading back to school this fall with more on their minds than just meeting their new teachers and classmates. At an age when social acceptance is very important, many children with the disease fear that they will be teased by their classmates. "Children with eczema often endure hurtful comments from peers because of the appearance of their skin,"

says Dr. Maha Haroun, Assistant Professor of Medicine at the University of Toronto. "A child suffering from eczema may feel uncomfortable in social settings and require additional emotional support and understanding from family members and teachers."

Here are a few important facts for teachers and parents to help children better cope with the disease and its consequences.

• Children with eczema may be self-conscious

A child's self-esteem is very fragile and children with eczema may be particularly self-conscious about the appearance of their skin. You may choose to address this issue delicately with your child by discussing such subjects as diversity, tolerance, and bullying in the classroom. Remind your child that eczema is NOT contagious and is not caused by poor hygiene.

• Some activities might make it worse

A child suffering from eczema may not be able to participate fully in certain activities, as these activities may make the condition worse. Excessive perspiration during physical activity and exposure to certain materials used in some arts and crafts may put the child at risk of a flare up. Eczema on the child's fingers may make it difficult for the child to hold a pair of scissors or even a crayon or pen.

• The child may not be able to sit still

When suffering from eczema, a child may not be able to sit still for very long because of the constant urge to scratch. It's very difficult for the child to resist scratching, but constant scratching will irritate the skin and cause a flare-up. Often the child may not even realize that they are scratching and he or she simply needs to be reminded to stop in a quiet, discrete way.



• The child may feel tired and drowsy

Drowsiness, fatigue, and poor concentration may result from sleepless nights due to the constant itch and physical discomfort of eczema. This may even affect their ability to complete homework assignments at times.

To help children with eczema get through the school year with flying colours, please visit the EASE website www.eczemaCanada.ca or call 1 (866) 432-0362 to receive complimentary fact-based information that you can pass along to your child's teachers, guidance counsellors and school nurse.

Ask the Doctor

Question:

What are the most predominant concerns for children with eczema during this time of the year?

Answer:

Going back to school can be a very stressful experience for children with eczema (atopic dermatitis). The school environment can be both physically and socially challenging for children with eczema. Some children are embarrassed by the way their skin looks. Some classmates may tease a child with eczema while others may keep their distance because they think that eczema is contagious. These issues may lead children to feel isolated and impair their ability to develop social relationships.

The physical discomfort of the disease may also interfere with a child's learning experience, as eczema often causes constant itching. The scratching and the fatigue that results from sleepless nights have been known to hinder children's performance in the classroom.

As the seasons change and the weather becomes less humid, many children will also start to experience a worsening of their eczema. It is important to remember that certain seasonal activities may be off-limits for children with eczema. For example, playing in the fall leaves may irritate the skin and aggravate the condition.



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Returning to school is a very busy time of year, and daily routines will often change. Consistent use of prescribed medication and dermatologist recommended skin care regimens can be overlooked. Unfortunately, this may lead to eczema flare-ups or cause the condition to worsen.

Is there help? Yes! Follow these tips to keep your child's eczema under control:

- Daily bathing to hydrate the skin followed immediately by a non-irritating emollient (moisturizer) at least once/day.
- Apply medicated creams and ointments as directed by your physician.
- If an anti-itch medication has been recommended, use as directed.
- See your doctor for any patch of eczema that is not clearing up as expected:
 - Some conditions are mistakenly diagnosed as eczema (e.g. ringworm).
 - Eczema which becomes infected may require treatment.
 - Sometimes your doctor may recommend different treatment options if the current prescription is not working.
- See your doctor immediately if your child's condition worsens or if he/she has a fever.

Healing hands

Hand eczema, also known as hand dermatitis, commonly starts with mild dryness and redness. It is often difficult to treat effectively. This condition can be very disabling and can affect one's ability to perform routine duties at home or at work.

Homemakers, parents with small children and health care professionals are often at risk of developing hand dermatitis. The most common cause is repetitive wetting and drying of the hands.



Below is some practical advice if you have hand dermatitis:

- Keep hand washing to a minimum when possible.
- When washing hands use luke warm water.
- Gently pat your hands dry – don't rub.
- Apply moisturizers after washing, clear ointments are preferred.

- Remove rings before washing your hands.
- To avoid washing your hands too often, wear cotton gloves to do general house work.
- Cotton gloves can be worn inside loose fitting rubber or vinyl gloves to prevent excessive sweating.
- Use a long handled brush for washing the dishes.
- While preparing food try to minimize contact with fruit, fruit juices, vegetables, raw meat, onions or garlic.
- Avoid contact with household cleansers, deodorants, and antibacterial soaps and cleansers.



- As the seasons change, it is important to remember that cold weather can also aggravate the condition. Cover up when exposed to cold air.
- See your dermatologist to discuss treatment options.

Myth:

Aloe Vera effectively treats eczema

Fact:

Aloe Vera effectively treats common conditions such as minor cuts and burns as well as insect bites. It is applied directly to the skin in the form of an ointment, cream or compress. Aloe vera can help relieve irritation caused by eczema. Although many, dermatologists recognize the soothing properties of Aloe, it is important to remember that Aloe Vera will not treat the disease and it has even been known to actually cause dermatitis to develop in some patients.

Meet the teacher!

Open dialogue between parents and teachers is essential to the effective management of eczema and the well-being of the child while at school. Parents might find it helpful to discuss their child's condition and treatments with their child's teacher at the beginning of the school year. Parents are encouraged to work closely with teachers to help alleviate some of the anxiety, fear and discomfort caused by the disease. Through awareness, support and education in the classroom, it is possible to create a positive learning and social environment for a child suffering from eczema.



Here is a checklist of things parents can do to help ease the anxiety and discomfort often associated with eczema in the classroom and to foster stronger relationships between teachers and children (and their parents) who are coping with chronic skin diseases.

- To avoid perspiration, which can make eczema worse, ask the teacher to seat your child away from heat sources like sunny windows, air vents or radiators.
- If school uniforms are required, ask whether a cotton alternative would be acceptable.
- Speak to the physical education teacher if sports activities need to be adapted to your child's needs.



- Prepare your child for the possibility that he or she may become the object of teasing and, if possible, ask the teacher to sensitize his or her classmates to the subject of eczema. It should be clearly explained that eczema is NOT contagious.
- Ask the teacher to conduct a class discussion to introduce such subjects as diversity, tolerance and bullying.
- School activities that require the manipulation of glue, paint, clay, foods, wood or metal can cause eczema flare-ups. Discuss alternatives with your child's teacher.



- Inform the people in charge at school of all food allergies and be sure that your child knows the foods that he or she must avoid eating.
- It's difficult for children not to scratch their eczema. Inform teachers that scratching can be an unconscious reaction and that it is okay to remind the child, in a discrete manner, not to scratch.
- Your child may be required to apply topical medication during the day. He or she may require the teacher's assistance or that of the school nurse.

Join the EASE program!

To become a member and for up to date information on eczema

Visit www.eczema.ca or call 1 866 432-0362



Eczema - It's Time to Take Control



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But It Itches So Much!



The Eczema Self-Test