

## WINTER 2008 - In this issue:

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## Beating those winter blues could help you manage your eczema

As the days get shorter and darker, it is not uncommon for people to experience the “winter blues”. For the thousands of eczema sufferers for whom emotional factors may trigger flare-ups, feeling down or stressed can make their eczema much worse. In fact, studies suggest that reducing stress and having a positive outlook are among the best strategies for managing eczema. This winter, taking control of your emotional triggers may even help minimize or prevent flare-ups and promote overall well-being.

First, try to identify the source of your stress. While it is often a combination of factors, it is helpful to know what is causing the stress (i.e. challenges at work, problems at home, etc.) in order to determine the best course of action to take.

If the stress is due to a short-term event or issue (i.e. preparing for a big presentation at work), it will probably dissipate on its own following the event. If it is an ongoing

problem, talk to your doctor and try using the following stress-management techniques:

- Get enough sleep – this will reduce stress and refresh your skin.
- Follow a well-balanced diet.
- Exercise regularly. While exercise is helpful in reducing stress, excess sweating could aggravate eczema symptoms, so try to avoid activities that make you sweat too much.
- Remove yourself from stressful situations (i.e. take a five-minute walk to clear your head, then return to the task at hand).
- Practice relaxation techniques (i.e. meditation, deep breathing, guided imagery, tai chi or yoga).
- Talk to someone (i.e. a friend, relative, counsellor or other health care professional) or write in a journal – expressing your feelings may help to reduce your stress.
- Avoid caffeine, smoking and excessive alcohol consumption.
- Have fun – indulge in a hobby, spend time with loved ones or participate in an activity that you enjoy.

Above all, even when life gets hectic and stressful, it is extremely important to maintain your skin care and treatment routine! Ask your dermatologist if there are any specific programs that are available to help you use your medication properly.

If emotional factors are among the triggers that cause your flare-ups, eczema symptoms may appear when you are stressed, anxious, angry or worried. Learning to recognize and cope with these emotions, through stress-management techniques or by changing your daily routine, may help you reduce stress and ultimately reduce the frequency or severity of flare-ups.



# Ask the Doctor

## Question:

I have eczema and I am pregnant. Are there alternatives to the medications that my regular doctor prescribed?

## Answer:

Any medication, including those prescribed for your eczema, should only be used during pregnancy after a thorough discussion with your doctor about the benefits of using the medication versus the potential risk to you and your baby. If you have moderate-to-severe eczema, or if you experience a severe flare-up during your pregnancy, some form of medication may have to be used for a short period of time until your symptoms are back under control. But if your symptoms are milder, there are lots of things you can do to help you manage them during this time.



**Diet, exercise, rest:** Eat a wide variety of foods, particularly fresh fruits, vegetables, healthy oils and lean protein, to keep your skin and your overall health in good condition. Light exercise, such as a walk in the park or a yoga session, can also help to relieve stress and improve the quality of your sleep.



Dr. Ronald Vender, MD, FRCPC  
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**Avoid irritants and triggers:** Soaps and detergents can be particularly harsh to sensitive skin, so look for products that are free of fragrances or other irritating ingredients. Your doctor can recommend products that are gentler on the skin. If you have allergies, stay indoors as much as possible when pollen counts are highest and keep house dust to a minimum to avoid dust mites. Wear loose, comfortable clothing made from breathable natural fibres such as cotton.

**Cleanse, moisturize and protect:** Gently cleanse your skin twice daily using a mild, non-irritating cleanser. While your skin is still moist after a bath or shower, apply lots of good-quality, fragrance-free moisturizer to help trap moisture within your skin. And don't forget to re-apply moisturizer throughout the day. While it is always essential to protect your skin with a non-irritating sunscreen (minimum SPF 30) when you go outdoors, it is especially important during pregnancy, when you may find you have less tolerance for the sun.

**Control the itch:** As you probably know, scratching the skin when you have eczema will only start a cycle of itching and scratching that becomes difficult to break. When you feel the itch, apply a cool, damp cloth to your skin and hold it in place until you feel the itch start to go away. Visit [www.eczemaCanada.ca](http://www.eczemaCanada.ca) for more tips on controlling the itch.

By regularly soothing and protecting your skin, you can help manage your eczema symptoms safely until your little bundle of joy arrives!

## Have a question for Dr. Vender?

To send it in, visit [www.eczemaCanada.ca](http://www.eczemaCanada.ca) and click on "Ask the Doctor". Then consult future issues of *The Eczaminer* to read the answer!

# EASE Program wins fourth Public Education Award from Canadian Dermatology Association

The Canadian Dermatology Association (CDA) recently presented the EASE Program with its fourth Public Education Award. The award is granted annually by the CDA for excellence in furthering the understanding of dermatologic issues and encouraging healthy behaviour in the medical, surgical and cosmetic care of skin, hair and nails<sup>1</sup>.

Since its inception in 2002, the EASE Program has been recognized by experts in the field of dermatology as *the* source for credible, medically-reviewed information and educational support on eczema for Canadians. Over two million Canadians suffer from eczema, which can affect not only sufferers themselves, but also friends and family members of those struggling to cope with this chronic condition. And, while its daily management can be especially difficult for young children and parents, the EASE Program offers unparalleled support through an affiliate of the EASE Program, known as Penny's World. Parents and children can visit the Penny's World website at [www.pennysworld.ca](http://www.pennysworld.ca) and enjoy a fun, colourful, and highly interactive experience as they learn to deal with eczema.

The EASE Program continues to work closely with the dermatology community to further quality education on eczema and to address the needs of those affected by it. A quick-reference tool entitled the *Eczema self-test* and a patient handbook entitled *Eczema: It's time to take control* have already helped thousands of patients learn more about the condition and manage it on a daily basis. These program offerings are supplemented by a newly redesigned, interactive patient website ([www.eczemacanada.ca](http://www.eczemacanada.ca)), and the availability of the patient handbook in multiple languages – English, French, Mandarin, Punjabi and Vietnamese. Recognizing the daily challenges of following a consistent treatment regimen for a chronic condition such as eczema, dermatologists have worked with the EASE Program to develop new tools that not only emphasize the importance of adherence to their treatment regimen, but also offer patients encouragement and support.

In keeping with its commitment to providing support tools for adults and children suffering from eczema, the EASE Program has made a number of important educational resources available through its website, [www.eczemacanada.ca](http://www.eczemacanada.ca).

## Living with eczema... one day at a time

Many people suffering from eczema begin their treatment program with the hope of having their symptoms disappear quickly. In fact, a 2005-2006 survey of more than 1,000 eczema sufferers revealed that 45 per cent of patients expect to see results from their eczema treatment in less than one week! As well, only 17 per cent of patients will continue to use their medication for one month or longer if they are not getting the results they expected.

The survey also revealed that only 22 per cent of patients reported using their medication regularly, as prescribed by their doctors. With a chronic condition such as eczema, symptoms are not only controlled by the use of an appropriate medication, but also by understanding the ups and downs of the disease, avoiding known triggers and maintaining a healthy lifestyle, including proper skin care. It's not surprising, then, that eczema sufferers experience frustration and disappointment when their expectations haven't been met and their symptoms are not controlled. So why don't eczema sufferers simply follow the treatment programs that their doctors designed for them?



We are all human and life can sometimes get in the way. Long commutes, challenges at work, juggling the kids' schedules, paying the bills and dealing with aging parents can leave us with little or no time to consider our own needs. After an exhausting day, it is tempting to fall into bed at night without using your eczema medication, even though you know deep down that it can't help you if you don't use it!

Your doctor understands these challenges and has access to a wide range of tools that may help you cope with the daily struggles of living with eczema. Ask your dermatologist for more information about a program that could help you set yourself up for success!

<sup>1</sup> Canadian Dermatology Association website - [www.dermatology.ca](http://www.dermatology.ca)

# Are topical steroids right for you?

The chronic nature of eczema means that sufferers will probably try a variety of treatments over the course of several years or throughout their lives. While it may take time to find the therapy that's right for you, be patient; your doctor will work with you to find the treatment that delivers the best possible outcome.

Doctors typically prescribe two types of medications to treat eczema: steroids (cortisone) and topical calcineurin inhibitors (TCIs). Many patients are apprehensive about using steroids because of possible side-effects. While topical steroids may be helpful in treating your particular case of eczema, TCIs are a steroid-free option that may be as effective, or more effective, in treating your condition.

For many years, doctors have relied on topical steroids to treat eczema flare-ups, benefits of which include quicker itch relief and a reduction of inflammation and redness. They are typically prescribed for short periods of time, as they have been shown to become less effective with prolonged use. Documented side-effects include thinning skin, increased fine hair growth and skin discolouration. These side-effects are related to the potency of the treatment, where it is being used on the body and the condition of the skin. There is also a risk that the steroids could be absorbed into the blood through the skin, which, in rare instances, could slow growth in children by suppressing the adrenal gland.

TCIs, which are the newest class of eczema therapy available in Canada, represent the first steroid-free topical therapy in more than forty years. Clinical studies show that TCIs can better target the inflammatory response to eczema, rather than simply treating the symptoms. TCIs can be used on all parts of the body, including the face and neck. Also, TCIs do not have the side-effects that are associated with steroids.

Many cases of eczema are treated with combination therapies that may offer patients the best possible mix of symptom relief, long-term prevention and management

of flare-ups. Combination therapies, in conjunction with a good daily skin care routine, including moisturizers and cold compresses, may have optimal results.

No matter what therapy is chosen for your case of eczema, your doctor will carefully monitor your progress to determine whether it is working properly or if another treatment may be needed. Even after your skin has healed from a flare-up, it is vital to continue to look after your skin. This can help reduce future flare-ups and help you better control your eczema.

It is important to keep in mind that every case of eczema is different and no single medication has worked for every person, every time. Just because a particular treatment program didn't work with someone you know, it could still be the best option for you.

The key is for you and your doctor to communicate openly about the various treatment options that are available, and to choose the treatment plan with the highest level of relief from eczema symptoms with the fewest side-effects. For more information, go to [www.eczemaCanada.ca](http://www.eczemaCanada.ca).

## EASE Program handbook: now available in three new languages!

The EASE Program handbook, *Eczema: It's time to take control*, is now available in English, French, Mandarin, Punjabi and Vietnamese! This handbook has already helped thousands of patients learn more about their condition and manage it on a daily basis. Visit [www.eczemaCanada.ca](http://www.eczemaCanada.ca) for details.

### Here's a peek at what's inside *Eczema: It's time to take control*:

- Tips on managing your child's eczema
- Advice on talking with others about your eczema
- A treatment progress chart
- Information about various treatment options
- and more!

### Join the EASE Program!

To become a member and for up-to-date information on eczema, visit [www.eczemaCanada.ca](http://www.eczemaCanada.ca) !



*Eczema: It's time to take control*



*But it itches so much!*



*Helping you take control of your eczema*