

This second of four articles takes a look at how the urban lifestyle can trigger episodes of atopic eczema.

THE urban lifestyle is desirable to many for the opportunities, convenience and variety it offers to its dwellers.

However, the comfort of city living does often come with a price.

Skin in the city

Hectic schedules, traffic congestion and air pollution are common complaints that preoccupy the average city folk's minds and grace their social media pages.

While these are usually minor hiccups for those living in the city, they often bring about challenges for those who have atopic eczema – a genetically-linked condition that leaves those who have it with a ten-

dency to have weaker skin barriers as a result of dry skin.

Stress and environmental skin irritants such as air pollutants, dust mites and harsh detergents, which are ubiquitous in the city, are known factors that can trigger eczema symptoms such as itchiness and inflammation.

"There are two subsets within the group of people who have



Environmental skin irritants like air pollution can trigger symptoms of atopic eczema in those prone to it. - Filepic

Stress is an important element that could exacerbate atopic eczema

Datin Dr Asmah Johar



atopic eczema," says senior consultant dermatologist Datin Dr Asmah Johar.

"The first group are not sensitised to any allergens in the environment, so their condition is purely inherited.

"However, there is another subset that are sensitised by allergens in the environment, and these are the patients whose (condition) can be more severe."

People living with atopic eczema usually inherit some genetic traits that lead to the underproduction or altered function of specific proteins, enzymes and lipids that form and maintain their skin barrier.

This leaves their skin vulnerable to environmental irritants and allergens, as well as internal imbalances in their body that can exacerbate their condition.

"Stress is an important element that could exacerbate atopic eczema," says Dr Asmah.

Although it is not yet proven that stress affects people living with atopic eczema, some report worsening symptoms when they are stressed.

Most of those who inherit the condition usually experience symptoms within the first five years of life, but about 65% find that their condition becomes less symptomatic after their teenage years.

In general, those with atopic eczema caused purely by genetic factors will have milder symptoms, and the condition is more likely to resolve by itself after they reach adulthood.

Those sensitive to external irritants and allergens may live with the condition longer.

Common symptoms of eczema include itchiness and rashes or inflammation of the skin around the neck and folds of a person's arms or legs.

When left untreated, this skin inflammation could worsen and become infected.

As there are many types of eczema, and its symptoms can be brought about by multiple factors, it is important for those suffering from it to obtain a diagnosis in order to better manage their symptoms.

For instance, those whose symptoms are caused by an interaction between their genetic tendencies and external irritants or allergens, can try to avoid or minimise their exposure to those triggers.

These can include alcohol consumption, sickness, sunburn and skin lesions like scratches, bites and cuts.

Those who are not affected by external allergens can use suitable moisturisers to help maintain their skin barrier by minimising skin dryness.

The treatment and management of atopic eczema usually involves the use of moisturisers, creams that contain steroids to reduce skin inflammation, and occasionally, oral anti-histamines to reduce itchiness.

When a person's symptoms are well controlled, steroids and anti-histamines can be reduced in dosage, or even stopped.

With an accurate diagnosis and proper treatment, those with atopic eczema can still live a healthy and productive life in the city.

■ This article is courtesy of Beiersdorf.