Health in the City 2012

Talk 2 Eczema and the Itch-Scratch Cycle

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Eczema is a very common skin condition that is also known as atopic dermatitis. About a third of the patients at my clinic have it. It is characterised by itchy and inflamed skin.

In the acute phase, the inflammation is intense and the skin becomes red and oozy, developing small vesicles that later dry up with some crusting. The skin becomes very itchy, and continuous scratching causes skin thickening and darkening.

Atopic eczema is most common in children, affecting 10-12% of them. Hotspots include the face, back of the knees and elbows. Half of them may grow out of it, but it may get worse in the other half, spreading to the hands and feet.

Eczema is not just one disease; it can be broadly divided into endogenous and exogenous. There is no straightforward cause: inner factors like genetics and outer factors such as allergens can aggravate it. The different types of eczema can be caused by exposure to chemicals, makeup, weather changes, dust, pet dander, etc.

An eczema flare up can be triggered by a combination of factors. As there is a dysfunction of the skin barrier, the skin cannot retain moisture. As water is lost easily, the skin gets dry and cracks, becoming itchy. The immune system is also activated, turning the skin sensitive.

Once you are exposed to allergens, it triggers inflammation, which then causes the itch-scratch cycle. As you scratch, the skin becomes more inflamed. The skin thickens from scratching, developing nodules and plaque. Bacteria, viruses and fungi may invade, leading to dangerous infections. All this contributes to a lot of stress and poor quality of life.

So, you need to break the itch-scratch cycle and get treatment. Make sure your fingernails are short. Always use a good emollient to keep skin moisturised – use it 2-3 times a day, particularly after bathing with a gentle, soap-free cleanser and before going to sleep. You may also need to take antihistamines regularly. Behavioural therapy can teach you how to break the habit of scratching.

If you require steroids, use it only on the affected areas, according to your doctor's instructions. Non-steroidal topical applications like Atopiclair can also be helpful. Use these strategies to break the itch-scratch cycle. **HT**