

Health | April 4, 2018 | By Korin Miller

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Yes, You Can Get Eczema on Your Scalp

Read on if an itchy scalp has you ready to pull your hair out.



If you have a scalp, it's going to itch at some point. That's just part of being human. But if your scalp is often so itchy it makes you want to crawl out of your skin, you might have eczema. Yup, on the top of your head, of all places.

Eczema is a condition that can cause flare-ups of a red, scaly, itchy rash to appear on different parts of your body, according to the Mayo Clinic. It generally happens on areas of your body like your hands, feet, ankles, wrists, neck, upper chest, eyelids, elbows, and knees, but it can be anywhere—including under your hair.

You would think you couldn't miss having eczema on your scalp, but people with this condition often mistake it for something else. "Many times, patients just assume it is a consequence they have to live with from their hair products, or that they have a dry scalp," Cynthia Bailey, M.D., a diplomate of the American Board of Dermatology and founder of Dr. Bailey Skin Care, tells SELF. Here's how to tell whether or not eczema is what's really behind your irritated scalp.

Eczema is technically known as atopic dermatitis, and it can be a complete beast.

Dermatitis is a catch-all term for skin inflammation. Atopic dermatitis in particular might happen because of a gene variation that makes it difficult for the skin to stay adequately moisturized and provide protection from bacteria, irritants, and allergens, according to the Mayo Clinic. This can result in patches of dry, inflamed, burning, and itchy skin. These areas might ooze liquid and crust over if you scratch them, which is really just adding insult to injury.

If you experience these symptoms on your scalp, you might assume you have an especially bad case of dandruff, which can result in itching, scaliness, and flakes that drift down onto your clothes. In response, you might decide to wash your hair more often or use specialty anti-dandruff shampoos, but that can actually make things worse for a couple reasons.

One is that eczema is commonly associated with contact dermatitis, an allergic reaction that happens when your skin becomes red, itchy, and inflamed in response to a trigger. You can get this reaction even if you don't have eczema and are using a shampoo, conditioner, or other hair product your skin doesn't like, Dr. Bailey says. If you *do* have eczema and use a product your scalp isn't into, you may be in for a world of irritation and sensitivity.

This is especially true if you take long, super-hot showers, are shampooing frequently to battle what you think is dandruff, or are scrubbing vigorously to do the same. Using anything hotter than warm water can worsen eczema, as can exposing yourself to water for more than 10 to 15 minutes at a time, according to the Mayo Clinic. Plus, scrubbing hard at scalp eczema can scratch your skin, which might just make your condition worse.

You might think you can't have eczema if you're *only* having issues with your scalp, but it's possible. While it's likely that having scalp eczema also means that you have it elsewhere, it's not a requirement. "Sometimes eczema can be seen only on the scalp," Gary Goldenberg, M.D., assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City, tells SELF.

Translation: If you're dealing with intense scalp irritation, don't assume you can combat it on your own—get to a dermatologist as soon as you can.

Your dermatologist may be able to diagnose your eczema simply by looking at your scalp.

It's really important to get the correct diagnosis, since there are other dermatological conditions that can cause an itchy scalp. Seborrheic dermatitis, for example, is a major cause of dandruff and has an entirely different treatment plan than eczema.

If your doctor confirms that you do indeed have scalp eczema, they might recommend any number of treatments, like drugs to reduce inflammation and calm an overactive immune system, according to the Mayo Clinic. If a hair product might be causing contact dermatitis that worsens your eczema, your doctor will likely recommend that you ditch it

and see where that gets you, New York City dermatologist Doris Day, M.D., author of *Beyond Beautiful*, tells SELF. They can probably also suggest gentle shampoos, conditioners, and other hair products that won't strip your scalp of moisture or otherwise make your eczema harder to handle.

Plenty of products at your local drugstore might promise to help with an itchy scalp, but using something like an over-the-counter dandruff shampoo won't treat your eczema. It could even make it worse, depending on what's in it. It's really best to talk to your doctor, Dr. Day says: "In most cases, only prescription-based treatments really work." Even if you don't have scalp eczema, your doctor can ID what's going on, offer treatment, and make your itchy scalp one less thing hanging over your head.