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Wait, Is Eczema Contagious?

Dermatologists want to spread some truth.



If you have a skin condition, feeling self-conscious is sometimes part of the package. For instance, if you have eczema, you might worry that people wonder, *Um, is eczema contagious?* whenever your symptoms flare up. Unfortunately, sometimes people *do* just assume this skin condition is transmissible and act with that in mind, Joshua Zeichner, M.D., a New York City-based board-certified dermatologist and director of cosmetic and clinical

research in dermatology at Mount Sinai Medical Center, tells SELF. “They see someone with a rash and stay away for fear that they will catch it,” he says.

As it turns out, that’s completely unnecessary.

Before we touch on the contagious aspect, let’s cover some eczema 101.

Eczema, aka atopic dermatitis, has the capacity to make your skin itchy, inflamed, and basically as dry as the sands of hell. Common symptoms include thick, cracked, scaly skin and red or brownish-gray patches that can show up anywhere but are most likely to develop on your hands, feet, ankles, wrists, neck, upper chest, eyelids, and inside the bends of your elbows and knees, according to the Mayo Clinic. Eczema can also manifest as weepy little bumps that might get all crusty when you scratch them, and the scratching itself can leave you with raw, tender, swollen skin.

If you have eczema, you might experience flare-ups of your symptoms sandwiched in between periods when your skin doesn’t bother you much. While eczema can be manageable, mainly through moisturizers to combat itching and drugs to fight inflammation and infections in open sores or cracked skin, there’s no cure for the condition.

Let the record show that eczema is not contagious—but it does tend to run in families.

At its core, eczema comes down to a problem with a person’s skin barrier, which is meant to offer protection from outside threats like bacteria, irritants, and allergens, according to the Mayo Clinic. If you have eczema, a gene variation prevents this barrier from offering all the protection it should, leaving your skin vulnerable to substances that can irritate it and trigger an immune response that results in eczema’s characteristic symptoms.

In addition to explaining why eczema happens, that gene variation also points to why it’s not contagious. “You cannot spread [eczema] to anyone else because it is in your genes,” Dr. Zeichner says. Think of how infectious diseases get passed along: through things like viruses, bacteria, fungi, and parasites. Since a gene variation is at the root of eczema, not any of these microorganisms, it’s not a communicable condition.

The fact that eczema tends to run in families might make it seem like it’s contagious to an outsider. Many people with eczema have a family member who also has it, or who has asthma, food allergies, or other allergies, Marie Leger, M.D., Ph.D., assistant professor of dermatology at Weill Cornell Medicine, tells SELF. These conditions are all “atopic” diseases, or conditions that make people’s immune systems hyper-reactive to certain stimuli, she explains, so it makes sense that they often show up together. It also makes sense that, since you share various genes with people who are physically related to you, these conditions can crop up in your family, potentially making something like eczema seem contagious even though it’s not.

If you have eczema, there are a few things you can do to try to help keep your condition under control.

Figure out what your triggers are, then avoid them like the plague if you can. Eczema can flare in response to things like dust, animals, mold, certain foods, pollen, cold and dry air, stress, and having a respiratory infection like a cold or the flu, according to the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

Harsh skin products are another major potential eczema trigger. “Good skincare is a must,” Gary Goldenberg, M.D., assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City, tells SELF. He recommends that his patients with eczema avoid using strong soaps and moisturizers, including products that contain any fragrance. (You’ll want products that say they’re fragrance-free instead of just unscented, since the latter may actually still have fragrances.)

Unless you’ve checked in with your dermatologist to formulate a skincare plan including exfoliating ingredients like salicylic acid, glycolic acid, and retinol, it’s better to take a pass on them, Dr. Zeichner says. These ingredients can also irritate your skin.

If you’ve already eliminated harsh products from your skincare routine but are still experiencing eczema symptoms, make sure you’re slathering a serious moisturizer onto your skin at least twice a day to quench its thirst, the Mayo Clinic says. If you’re not sure where to start, check out these products, or ask your dermatologist for guidance.

Also keep in mind that your skincare products can only do so much if you’re dousing your skin with scalding hot water. Taking hot showers that go on forever—or washing your face with water that could practically boil an egg—may exacerbate eczema and general skin irritation, Dr. Goldenberg says. For that reason, it’s a good idea to limit yourself to baths and showers of no more than 15 minutes, and use warm water instead of hot whenever washing your skin.

If you have eczema and people ask if it’s contagious, now you have all the science-y info you need to explain the truth.

And if you *don’t* have eczema, now you know there’s absolutely zero reason to feel nervous that the condition is catching. If a friend or family member has it, it’s really just due to a gene variation that is officially their own personal health-related business. If they do happen to ask you for help in figuring out how to tame their eczema, though, you’ve got some expert-approved intel that might be of use.