

Health | June 15, 2018 | By Korin Miller

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6 Eczema Symptoms You Should Bring Up With Your Derm

Cue the incessant itching.



Eczema symptoms are hard to ignore. When something's wrong with your skin—one of your body's largest organs—you're probably going to notice. But, depending on the severity of your eczema symptoms, you might think you just have problematic skin—not an actual condition that you can manage with the help of a doctor.

Here are a few key things everyone should know about eczema, plus some common symptoms to keep on your radar.

What is eczema, anyway?

Eczema is a chronic condition (meaning you can't get rid of it) that happens because of an issue with your skin's protective barrier. This problem, sometimes called a skin barrier dysfunction, keeps your top layer of skin from properly retaining moisture and protecting you from irritants and allergens, Cynthia Bailey, M.D., a diplomate of the American Board of Dermatology and president and CEO of Advanced Skin Care and Dermatology Inc., tells SELF.

If you have eczema, you might notice that sometimes the symptoms resulting from this dysfunction get worse, and other times, they're basically nonexistent. This is one characteristic of the condition, which can flare up in response to triggers like sweat, stress, harsh soaps and detergents, dust, and pollen, the Mayo Clinic says. Symptoms can also flare for no obvious reason.

What eczema signs and symptoms should I look out for?

There are many types of eczema, since it's used as an umbrella term for rashes that can make you feel itchy. For clarity's sake, though, we're focusing on atopic dermatitis, the clinical term for the most basic form of eczema. With that in mind, these are the classic signs of eczema you should know:

1. Dry skin: So, you know how that skin barrier dysfunction allows irritants and allergens to seep past what would normally be your protective exterior? Your body can then interpret these intruders as threats to your health and respond with skin inflammation, which can dry you out, Dr. Bailey explains. What's more, your skin can lose too much moisture as a side effect of that barrier dysfunction, which can make the dryness even worse.

2. Itchiness: Dryness and itchiness are a less delightful version of PB & J. They go together so seamlessly because dryness makes your skin more prone to irritation, and thus, itching, according to the Cleveland Clinic.

For many people, itching is the most bothersome symptom of eczema, **Gary Goldenberg, M.D.**, assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital, tells SELF. Though it can happen at any time, it's often worse at night because you have no other distractions from the itchy feeling when you're trying to fall asleep, 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.

3. Red, brown, or gray skin patches: These patches often start out red due to inflammation, Dr. Bailey says. As they stick around, they can become a reddish-brown or brownish-gray color. They also typically show up first in places like the hands, feet, ankles, wrists, and folds of the elbows and knees, Dr. Bailey says, although doctors don't know why. "Rashes often have skin regions that are particularly susceptible," she says.

4. Raised bumps that can leak fluid: These are eczema-induced blisters that happen because of inflammation, Dr. Goldenberg says. If you scratch them, they might break open, leak that fluid, and form a crust when they dry, the Mayo Clinic says.

5. Thick, cracked, scaly skin: If your skin itches, it's pretty hard to avoid the temptation to scratch it. But when you scratch a lot over time, your skin can thicken, crack, and become scaly in response to the constant injury, Dr. Zeichner says.

6. Raw, sensitive, and swollen skin: Eczema's inflammation can cause your skin to swell and become sensitive, but if you scratch all the time, or if you have any open sores that get infected, your skin can become even more raw, sensitive, and swollen as a result.

way that prolongs or worsens the flare. “You start scratching, the skin breaks, it becomes more inflamed, and the cycle starts,” Dr. Bailey says.

How do I get an eczema diagnosis?

You don’t actually need a lab test to diagnose eczema. Instead, your doctor will probably make a diagnosis by looking at your skin and your medical history, the Mayo Clinic says.

But given that it’s sometimes easy to confuse eczema with other skin disorders, your doctor may use patch testing (exposing your skin to different substances to see how it reacts) to help rule out other skin diseases like psoriasis or to see if you have any other conditions along with eczema, the Mayo Clinic says.

In general, any dermatologist should be able to properly diagnose you, but it doesn’t hurt to see one who specializes in eczema and other skin diseases if you can, Dr. Bailey says.

What are my treatment options?

If you have eczema, you’re not doomed to spend a lifetime with itchy, dry skin and no relief—but you do need to stay on top of your condition. “If eczema is not treated, it can worsen over time or become infected,” Dr. Goldenberg says.

Part of eczema treatment comes down to preventing flares, which basically means treating your skin like the delicate organ it really is. That means avoiding your triggers if you can, and also moisturizing the heck out of your skin with products specifically formulated to help tame eczema, or at least to be ultra kind to your skin. Dr. Bailey recommends looking for products labeled “hypoallergenic.” “Gentle” and “sensitive” are good options too. This generally means these products won’t contain irritants like fragrances, alcohols, and dyes, though it’s always smart to check the label just to be sure.

It’s also important to avoid hot water when you bathe, shower, wash your hands, or otherwise come into contact with water, since it can dry out your skin. You’ll also need to moisturize after you’ve been in contact with water, Dr. Bailey says, unless you like feeling as though you’re a dried out shell of a human being.

During an actual flare, your doctor might recommend certain medications to help control itching and repair your skin, including a corticosteroid cream or ointment, the Mayo Clinic says. If you develop an open sore or cracks, your doctor may prescribe an antibiotic cream or oral antibiotic to combat any possible infections. And, if you have a really intense form of eczema, your doctor might recommend oral corticosteroids to try to control the inflammation. For an especially severe flare, your doctor may tell you to wrap the area where you have eczema with topical corticosteroids and wet bandages to soothe your distressed skin.

Finally, it seems obvious, but avoiding scratching your skin is pretty important, especially during an eczema flare, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) says. If you know this is going to be a challenge for you, or if you tend to scratch in your sleep, keep your fingernails short and consider wearing gloves at night when you sleep, the NIAID says. It might feel ridiculous, but hey, if it helps, that’s what matters most.

Eczema is sometimes a lot to handle, but experts say it’s possible to have relatively itch-free, clear skin with the right treatment plan.

“Most people can find that sweet spot with their skin-care that keeps their skin hydrated and inflammation-free,” Dr. Bailey says. It will probably take some experimentation and guidance from an expert, though. Don’t hesitate to reach out to a doctor if your dryness, itching, or other eczema symptoms are spiraling out of control.