

# The Children's Doctor



**My 18 month old son has always had dry skin and has recently been diagnosed with eczema. My doctor has recommended using steroid creams but I am hesitant to do this in case it damages his skin. Is there anything else I can do? Will he outgrow this?**

Eczema is a condition causing dry, itchy areas on the skin. It is also known as dermatitis. It is not contagious. It frequently occurs in families and is strongly linked with asthma and hay fever. It can affect any area of the body but usually affects the face and abdomen in babies, inside of wrists in toddlers, and folds of elbows and knees in older children.

Because dry skin is the underlying problem, moisturisers should be the mainstay of treatment. There are many moisturisers available but it is best to buy the simplest creams you can find. The key is to use lots and lots of moisturiser so you don't want to buy the most expensive you can find! Sorbolene cream (not lotion) with 10% glycerine is the most common moisturiser used on children and is cheap and effective. It should be applied liberally over the entire body at least twice every day when the skin looks good and three to four times a day when the skin is dry. It is readily available from pharmacies and supermarkets. If sorbolene cream stings or is not tolerated, other moisturisers are available. Try to avoid those with extra additives which may cause irritation, even natural / herbal products can irritate very sensitive skin.

When eczema flares up, steroid creams should be used to settle the inflammation. If not, the eczematous areas can deteriorate leading to infection or scarring. Steroid creams are safe when used as directed but should only be applied to affected areas (not the whole body). Steroid creams should be used as directed by your doctor. If you use it less than suggested, the eczema may improve but is likely to flare as soon as the steroid is stopped. This often results in unnecessary long term use of steroid creams. When the eczema settles, the steroid cream should be stopped. Treatment with moisturising creams (sorbolene) should continue to help prevent further flare ups. Occasionally, eczema will become infected with a bacteria requiring treatment with an oral antibiotic. If the skin continues to deteriorate despite treatment at home, hospitalisation may be required for the application of wet dressings.

The following are known to irritate sensitive skin and should be avoided:

- \* wool
- \* acrylic
- \* dust mite
- \* soap and bubble bath (sorbolene can be used as a soap alternative)
- \* sand
- \* chlorine
- \* pet hair

**Always seek medical advice if the condition continues to deteriorate despite usual therapy.**