
Eczema and bathing : Information for carers of children with eczema

Bathing and cleaning is an important part of living with a child with eczema. There are lots of possible benefits: removing dirt, irritants and allergens from the skin surface, softening the skin by helping it to take up water, establishing a routine, giving play opportunities, providing a bonding activity between young children with eczema and their carers, and reducing stress through relaxing. But bathing can also dry out the skin and make it itch more if care is not given to applying plenty of emollients (prescribed moisturisers) to the skin after bathing. Skin does not have to feel dry and tight to be 'clean'.

Shower or bathe?

There is no right or wrong answer to this question. It is much easier to bathe a baby or toddler. Older children and adolescents tend to prefer showers. The important point is what you do to the skin when you get out of the bath or shower.

Temperature

Use warm rather than hot water. The hotter the water, the more damaging it is to the skin because very hot water takes away all the precious skin oils and also makes the skin more irritable and likely to itch. Equally, the water should be warm enough for the child to be comfortable. Some people have advocated luke warm water, but luke warm water is a miserable experience.

Bath additives

- **Soap substitute**

Children with eczema should avoid soaps, bubble baths and shower gels because they dry out and can irritate the skin. Emollients (prescribed moisturisers) should be used as a soap substitute instead. Mix a small amount of soap substitute in the palm of your hand (about half to one teaspoonful) with a little warm water and put them on to wet skin. Alternatively, rub into skin before using bath or shower. Rinse off with water, as you would do normally when washing with soap when bathing, showering or hand washing. If your skin stings after using the emollient wash products and does not settle down after rinsing, speak to your doctor or pharmacist about an alternative soap substitute.

National guidance advises not to use a **shampoo** for a child under one year of age. Up until this age, using an emollient as a shampoo substitute is advised. If this continues to suit the child, there is no need to change. If you

feel you want to use a shampoo, find one that claims to be suitable for eczema. If you use a shampoo when showering, try not to let it run on to the body. Another way to avoid shampoo running onto the body is to lean over an empty bath and wash the hair using a shower head there so that all the suds run off into the bath rather than onto your skin.

- **Oat baths**

These are used to reduce itching. Put porridge oats in an old sock, and hang it on tap as filling the bath to allow water to run through.

- **Prescribed emollient bath oil additives**

Several emollient bath oil additives are available. Which are poured into the bath. There is not good evidence that they do much more than directly applying an emollient to the skin when getting out of the bath, but if you are already using them and your child likes them, then it is OK to stick with them. Some of these bath oils also contain additional ingredients specifically for itching and infection. The amounts added to the bath should be used as directed and not tipped in without measuring as too much of the added ingredients may irritate rather than help the skin. Emollients can all make the bath or shower slippery, so always use a non-slip bath mat.

- **Bath treatments**

There are specific bath treatments that are used occasionally for eczema treatment. These should only be used with the guidance of your doctor. Examples are salt baths (using sea salt at about the concentration found in sea water which is 20 fluid ounce jug of sea salt per 3 gallon bucket of water) or bleach baths: dilute bleach baths (a small capful of regular sodium hypochlorite unconcentrated bleach mixed thoroughly in a normal sized plumbed –in bath) can help to decrease skin infections and reduce the need for antibiotics in people with more severe eczema complicated by lots of infections. Further information on Bleach bath therapy <http://www.aad.org/dermatology-a-to-z/diseases-and-treatments/a---d/atopic-dermatitis/eczema-bleach-bath-therapy>

Frequency

This is one of those areas where different health care professionals will tell you different things. Generally the advice is that bathing should be no more than once daily but might be less than this. Go with whatever is comfortable for you and your child. And of course, exposure to dirt and irritants may vary from day to day, and this may change the bathing frequency too. Just as the time of year may affect bathing frequency, if a child gets sweatier in the summer for instance. Whilst bathing should not be more than once daily, cleaning a baby's face, hands and bottom may need to be more often!

How long to soak

A child should not spend too long in the bath. But equally, the child can still have time to play and enjoy the experience. About 15 minutes is about right.

Timing in the day

Some recommend that you perform your bathing and moisturizing at night just before going to bed. You are unlikely to further dry out or irritate your skin while sleeping, so the moisture can be more thoroughly absorbed into your skin

Written by Professor Hywel Williams, Dr Ruth Murphy, Dr Jane Ravenscroft, Nurse Consultant Sandra Lawton and parents on behalf of the Nottingham Support Group for Carers of Children with Eczema

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After bathing or showering

This is the most important bit of advice regarding bathing. It is critical that whenever your child has bathed or showered or been in contact with the water, the skin is gently pat dry with a soft towel followed by plenty of your child's chosen emollient applied directly to the skin. Allow 30 minutes if possible after using the emollient before applying other treatments such as topical steroids.

Stinging

if your child has lots of broken skin, water can cause temporary stinging. This may be helped by applying moisturisers before the bath. If this doesn't work then seek advice from your doctor as your child may need stronger eczema treatment or antibiotics.

Water softeners

Although the hardness of mains water may affect the severity of eczema, a recent national study led from Nottingham study has shown that water softeners are not helpful for improving eczema.

Wet wipes

We do not recommend wet wipes as they often contain ingredients to which you can become allergic.

Other Advice

- When using emollients in the bath or shower it is important that you clean the bath or shower afterwards. There are several reason for this , the oils and grease can build up making the bath very slippery. Also it helps to clear the drains. We would recommend using washing up liquid hot water and a soft cloth / brush to clean the area. Rinse well to remove all the detergent and dry with kitchen towel.
- Do not leave lids off pots of emollients as this is a source of infection.
- Don't use flannels that have been left damp of the side of bath as may be another source of infection.
- If using bath toys, grease may build up on them so wash in hot soapy water or dish washer.
- An old towel can be used as a shower mat.

Further information

Skin Moisturisers in Atopic Eczema

<http://www.nottinghameczema.org.uk/nsgcce/documents/skin-moisturisers-in-atopic-eczema.pdf>

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