

Eczema and bathing: Information for carers of children with eczema

Bathing and cleansing the skin is an important aspect of eczema care and a routine that suits you and the family should be planned. There are many reasons why bathing is important:

- It removes dirt, irritants and allergens from the skin surface which may trigger a flare of eczema.
- It helps with softening and moisturising the skin.
- Bathing should be a fun, playful time – a time for bonding and relaxing.

But bathing can also dry out the skin and make it itch more if care is not given to apply plenty of emollients (prescribed moisturisers) to the skin after bathing. Skin does not have to feel dry and tight to be 'clean'.

Shower or bath?

There is no right or wrong answer to this question. It is much easier to bath 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. Heat 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 and children / patients often say they feel cold very quickly.

What Products Can I use in the bath or shower?

- **Soap substitutes**

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. A small amount of soap substitute can be mixed in the palm of your hand (about half to one teaspoonful) with a little warm water and put on to wet skin. Alternatively, they can be rubbed gently into skin before using the bath or shower. After washing or showering the skin should be rinsed off with water, as you would do normally when washing with soap for bathing, showering or hand washing. If your child's skin stings after using the emollient wash products and does not settle down after rinsing, speak to your doctor or pharmacist about an alternative emollient soap substitute.

- **Emollient bath oils and additives**

Several emollient bath oil additives are available which are poured into the bath. There is no 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

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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.

- **Other 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 or specialist eczema team. Examples are:

Salt baths (using sea salt at about the concentration found in sea water) may be recommended. See further information: <http://www.nottinghameczema.org.uk/documents/19-salt-water-baths-and-eczema.pdf>

Bleach baths: may help to decrease skin infections and reduce the need for antibiotics in people with more severe eczema complicated by lots of infections. See further information: Antiseptic Baths (Bleach Bath) for the treatment of eczema <http://www.nottinghameczema.org.uk/documents/antisepticbath36abthjuly17.pdf>

Frequency

A study led from Nottingham has shown that whether you bath daily or weekly does not seem to make a difference to eczema severity, giving you the freedom to do what you feel suits you best. Exposure to dirt and irritants may vary from day to day, and this may change the bathing frequency too. The season of the year may affect bathing frequency – more in the summer if a child gets sweaty and less often in the winter when the weather and reduced natural skin oil production can have a drying effect on the skin. 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 in the evening or 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

After bathing or showering

This is the most important bit of advice regarding bathing. It is important that whenever your child has a bath or shower or been in contact with the water, their skin is gently patted dry with a soft towel and their chosen emollient applied directly to the skin. Allow 30 minutes if possible after using the emollient before applying other treatments such as topical corticosteroids.

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Stinging

If your child's skin is very dry with cracks and splits, water often causes temporary stinging. This may be helped by applying moisturisers before the bath. Stinging is often a sign of under-treated eczema, so if this doesn't work then seek advice from your doctor as your child may need stronger eczema treatment.

Shampoo and Hair Washing

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, perhaps find one that claims to be suitable for eczema. If you do use a shampoo when showering, try not to let it run over the body when rinsing it off because it can remove too much of the skin's natural oils. Another way to avoid shampoo running onto the body is to lean over an empty bath and wash the hair using a shower head so that the suds run into the bath rather than onto the skin.

Water softeners

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

<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/groups/cebd/projects/swet.aspx>

Wet wipes

We do not recommend wet wipes as they often contain ingredients which you/your child can become allergic to. Reusable alternatives such as flannels and muslin squares are eco-friendly options and more gentle on the skin.

Other Advice

- When using emollients in the bath or shower it is important that you clean the bath or shower afterwards. There are several reasons 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 on 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/documents/emollient-final-aug22.pdf>

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