

Eczema and exercise for children

Daily physical activity and a balanced diet help to keep the heart, lungs, brain and body strong and healthy. Exercise, active play and increased physical activities reduce stress, depression and anxiety, all of which can impact on eczema. It improves concentration, school work and sleep, and may reduce the chances of getting serious illnesses in later life. Exercise is good for mind and body. Here are some simple tips to make exercising good fun for those with eczema – see the “Further information” section for general details of how to exercise.

General guidance

- Children under 1 year of age who are not yet mobile should aim for at least 30 minutes of tummy (prone position) time spread across the day.
- Children aged from 1-5 years are recommended to be physically active for at least 180 minutes each week, get strong, move more and break up inactivity.
- Children and young adults from 5-18 years of age are advised to aim for at least 60 minutes of physical activity across the day, get strong and move more. Plus reduce inactivity.

Exercise options

Exercise is good for mind and body. Here are some simple tips to make exercising good fun for those with eczema – see the “Further information” section for general details of how to exercise. No form of exercise should be out of bounds for someone with eczema but some can be easier to do than others. Sweat and heat during active play or sport may make the skin of people with eczema more itchy or sore. If itch or soreness is a problem, trial and error can establish the length of bursts of exercise which are possible before the itch and soreness become unbearable. Dab away sweat rather than wipe it away, there is less irritation that way. Shower off the sweat as soon as possible, and remember to put moisturiser on the skin afterwards. Walking or cycling to school, taking the stairs more often and playing in the park are all forms of exercise. Two common forms of active play for children are considered below but there is a wide choice for children nowadays including dancing, martial arts, and many active play options such as skating. All activity should be spread throughout the day and aim to promote movement skills, and develop muscle and bone strength across the week.

- a) **Swimming** Swimming is a good all round exercise, but it tends to dry out the skin. Different pools may use different methods apart from chlorine to keep the water clean. It is trial and error to find out which one suits your child. If the eczema is infected it may be wise to avoid swimming. Eczema skin is more susceptible to

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the drying effect of the water and chlorine. It needs protection. You should apply emollient before swimming; it does not need to be a thick application, which would result in the emollient floating in the pool. After swimming your child should shower immediately and reapply emollient immediately after drying – not when you get home by which time it has dried out and then reapply the emollient. Do not wait until you get home to put your emollient on as your child’s skin will become dry and irritated very quickly. When using emollients in the pool please be aware of slipping and leave the area safe afterwards.

- b) **Football** For sports that require shin pads apply an emollient, then wear a cotton tubular bandage under the shin pads to help prevent the dirt, sweat and shin pads causing further friction and irritation.

Environment

Inside or outside? Each has potential advantages. Static cycling in a cooled room may be preferable to being outside in the midday summer sun. Working out at home allows the person to wear less clothing without being vulnerable. But a cooling breeze outside, could help too.

With outside sports, problem areas of skin may include the face, hands and legs if exposed to many of the factors which may irritate, such as changes in temperature, snow, ice, mud, dust and grass. Emollient applied before the activity will help to protect the skin. If there is flexibility over the timing of exercise, choose cooler times of day (morning or late afternoon) during the summer and warmer times in winter.

Clothing

Always use comfortable clothing and shoes that give good support. Wear layers, so that they can be gradually discarded as the body warms up. Light cotton or wicking garments are best next to the skin. Sweat bands may help to keep sweat irritation off the face. If hair tends to make the skin sensitive, find an acceptable way of restraining it (cap or tie back). Clothing for many sporting activities may contain synthetic materials so your child may wish to wear a light cotton garment or cotton gloves underneath them.

Showering afterwards

Showering after exercise helps to cool the skin and make it less itchy and will get rid of irritants from the skin (sweat, salt, grass and chlorine) but it will also dry out the skin. Use a soap substitute in the shower, don’t let shampoo run over the body, keep the water not too hot and pat dry before applying plenty of emollients as soon as your child gets out of the shower.

Precautions

- Use a Vaseline based lip balm that is not perfumed or flavoured to protect the lips.
- Put emollient on before active play (especially if swimming or to aid flexibility over joints if the skin cracks over them). If sweating and overheating are problems, avoid the thicker emollients ointments which may make the skin feel hotter.

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- If your child has a lighter skin colour, use sun block of SPF30 or more to protect against the sun's harmful effects when exercising outside. Take antihistamine if grass contact or hay fever is going to be a problem.
- If the pollen count is high, apply emollients before going outside to prevent the pollen penetrating the skin and wash face when coming in. Apply some Vaseline to the nostrils to prevent pollens penetrating the airways. Wash off these areas when your child comes in again and reapply emollients.
- If your child has asthma they should follow their asthma management plan agreed with their doctor or asthma nurse. If the asthma is brought on by active play or when going out in the cold, then they may need to use a short-acting reliever inhaler (salbutamol, usually a blue inhaler) before going out.
- If exercise continues to be a problem for the eczema, or any other long term health condition, discuss with your doctor the best way of increasing daily physical activity.

Further information

Physical activity for early years 0-5 years

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/829882/1-physical-activity-for-early-years-birth-to-5.pdf

Physical activity for young people 5-18 years

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/832861/2-physical-activity-for-children-and-young-people-5-to-18-years.pdf

2019 WHO advice for sleep and physical activity <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/24-04-2019-to-grow-up-healthy-children-need-to-sit-less-and-play-more>

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