

Reducing the risk of your new born baby developing eczema

If a parent has eczema, the risk of a child developing eczema is increased. This is slightly higher if the mother is affected, and higher if both parents or a sibling are affected.

Breast feeding: At the moment there is no clear evidence that breast feeding per se, or prolonged and exclusive breastfeeding with later introduction of solids protects against eczema. Breast feeding is good for babies, but you should do what you are comfortable with and just use common sense in terms of milk and when to introduce solids into your baby's diet. If you do decide to breastfeed and are using treatment for your eczema, don't forget to discuss this with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist, so that you can be sure that unintentional harm to your baby does not occur.

Weaning: Early weaning is currently not recommended. In babies with a high risk of getting eczema, wait until at least 6 months of age before solids are introduced if possible. The best first solids are foods that are least likely to cause allergies, e.g. baby rice, fruits such as apples and pears, and vegetables such as potato. If you would like more information on weaning, talk with your health visitor. Introduce one food at a time. Give it daily for a week before you decide if it has a bad effect, e.g. skin rash, changes in poo. However, if you see an immediate reaction such as swelling and redness of your baby's lips and face, stop giving that food at once and talk to your doctor before trying that food again. If you are breast-feeding your baby, a vitamin and perhaps an iron supplement should also be given from when the baby is 6 months. Discuss this with your doctor or health visitor. Both you and your baby should have a good well-balanced diet and if you are restricting your diet at all, you should always ask to see a dietitian for further advice.

Caring for your baby's skin

- When your baby is born, it is important to keep things simple. They may have areas of dry skin just like many babies, but it is still important to avoid things that can irritate and dry the skin more, such as soaps, detergents, wool and being too hot or cold. Use any simple unperfumed moisturiser (emollient) which can be prescribed by your doctor, apart from aqueous cream, after bathing your baby. This may protect their skin and prevent likely allergens such as house dust mite and pollen from triggering the eczema.
- It is very tempting with a new born to use baby toiletries but if there is asthma, eczema, hay fever or food allergies in the family, avoid using soap or bubble bath products or any product with an added perfume (including those products that have a "baby" smell).
- Cradle cap: olive oil which is commonly used for cradle cap is no longer recommended. Research shows that it can damage the skin barrier. If your baby does have cradle cap a simple emollient (not aqueous cream as this is not suitable) can be used to soften and wash the hair. If the cradle cap becomes a real problem then you should seek medical advice as this may be the first sign that they may have eczema.

Environmental triggers (including tobacco smoke, gas fumes and car emissions from nearby busy roads) also have a potential adverse role to play in the development of childhood eczema.

House Dust Mite: House dust mite avoidance is most likely to be beneficial if there is already eczema in the family. Simple house dust reduction measures include:

1. Remove soft furnishing and carpets and keep things simple.
2. Vacuum daily, when the baby is not in the room.
3. Use cotton or plastic play mat, which can be washed easily rather than play on the carpet.
4. Blinds at the windows or curtains that can be washed regularly.
5. Bedding that can be washed at high temperature 60 degrees centigrade .
6. Covers for the bedding.
7. Damp dust. Wash soft toys weekly or keep only a couple of the favourite ones in the bedroom.
8. Air the room well, open windows, keep the room cool.
9. Keep pets out of the bedroom

If eczema develops

After following all the above advice, if your baby still gets some patches of eczema, please do not feel guilty, as you may still have stopped the eczema getting even worse. Remember that 60-70% of children grow out of their eczema. Don't use creams or ointments you already have for your own eczema on your baby, as these may be too strong for your baby's skin. Ask your health visitor, pharmacist, nurse or doctor for advice.

Carer's skin care

It is important to also take care of your own skin especially if you have had eczema in the past. Caring for a new baby involves frequent hand washing and exposure to detergents, sterilising solution and other products which all can irritate the skin. Skin protection is important for you as well:

1. Protect your hands from direct contact with soaps, detergents, scouring powders, and similar irritating chemicals by wearing waterproof, cotton lined, gloves.
2. Wear waterproof gloves while peeling and squeezing lemons, oranges, or grapefruit, peeling potatoes, and handling tomatoes.
3. When washing your hands, use lukewarm water and a soap substitute (emollient). All soaps are irritating. No soap is "gentle to your skin."
4. Rings often worsen eczema by trapping irritating materials beneath them. Remove your rings when doing housework and before washing your hands.
5. When outdoors, in cold or windy weather, wear gloves to protect your hands from drying and chapping.
6. Protect your hands with an emollient.
7. If your hands become too dry and uncomfortable, ease them overnight by coating them with a thick layer of emollient only and then covering them with polythene disposable gloves (helps absorption and protects the bedding).

Further reading

Vitamin d - advice on supplements for at risk groups

http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120405095111/http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Lettersandcirculars/Dearcolleagueletters/DH_132509

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