


NOTTINGHAM SUPPORT GROUP FOR CARERS OF CHILDREN WITH ECZEMA

In association with : Nottingham University Hospitals 
NHS Trust

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.

Sleep Disturbance in Atopic Eczema - Information for Parents

Sleep disturbance is one of the commonest problems in children with atopic eczema. Not only does your child become tired and irritable due to lack of sleep but carers also lose sleep and become exhausted. It is a miserable thing for your child to wake up with an itching skin and parents often feel frustrated and helpless when they do not know how to help their child.

Here are some practical tips that might help you break the cycle of sleep loss in your family:

Treat your child's underlying eczema more aggressively

If it is your child's eczema that is causing him / her to wake at night, then it is logical to do everything you can to treat this. Even when the skin does not look particularly red and bumpy, eczema may still be present under the skin, so you should take your child seriously if they complain of an itchy skin. Telling your child to stop scratching is probably not very helpful and possibly increases his / her anxiety causing them to scratch more. Treatment with moisturisers, topical corticosteroids, bandages, and prevention of damage with cotton mittens are all part of the normal measures one can do in order to help treat your child's eczema. Itching of the scalp is an area that is often forgotten in atopic eczema and there are steroid scalp applications, which can be applied before bedtime if this is a particular problem.

Create an environment which will reduce itching

Wrapping your child up in a thick duvet in a centrally heated bedroom will probably make the itching far worse. Keeping the bedroom cool by opening the window in the daytime and keeping the central heating on low probably helps. If your child is allergic to tree and grass pollen it is important to keep the window closed at night because pollen levels rise during the night. Using plain cotton sheets is also better than a thick continental quilt, which can often lead to overheating in the early hours of the morning. Loose fitting cotton pyjamas are also probably helpful. Having a bath about an hour before bed followed by plenty of moisturisers is another thing that you can do to help cool your child's skin.


Helping your child to get off to sleep and getting a night's sleep yourself

There are many tips on how to get your child off to sleep such as letting your child fall asleep downstairs, taking them for a drive, giving them a cool bath, reading books etc and you must choose whatever you feel is most effective and right for your family. Try to avoid your child falling asleep in the day as this will obviously affect his / her ability to sleep at night. It is also important that you are quite flexible about putting your child to bed and if he / she is not really tired, it may be wiser to allow him / her to stay up a little longer and fall asleep downstairs. Putting your child to bed when they are not especially tired may encourage further scratching as most scratching occurs in the "twilight" zone between sleep and wakefulness. Occasionally, antihistamines are useful when used for 5 – 7 days in breaking a cycle of sleep disturbance due to itching. Children often become quite tolerant of antihistamines which should be given about 1 hour before bed in order to give them enough time to take effect. Try to avoid the common problem of letting your child climb into your bed. This may encourage an abnormal pattern of behaviour in your child whereby they learn to gain from their eczema and have little reason to stop this behaviour pattern. It is also likely that your bed will be warmer than your child's bed and this in itself may make your child itch more. It is better to go to your child's room and give them the love and care that they ask for and then have the courage to leave them to fall asleep in their own bedroom.

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What can I do when my child wakes crying and scratching because of his / her eczema?

Sometimes very little is needed apart from cuddling your child and leaving them to go back to sleep. Application of a cream based moisturiser is also a useful way of cooling the skin. Keeping some moisturiser in the fridge is a handy way of having a cooling application ready to apply if needed. Removing some of the bed sheets may also be another way of cooling your child. If your child is visibly tearing at the skin causing it to bleed, then you need to protect that area with some form of bandaging (e.g. Tubifast) and by starting more aggressive treatment of your child's eczema in general. If your child refuses to accept bandages or any creams, you may be able to negotiate a reward system whereby your child will be allowed to watch their favourite video or play with their favourite game after they have co-operated with treatment. It is most important that you honour this agreement otherwise you will lose your child's trust. Finally, you should bear in mind that many children without atopic eczema are poor sleepers and your child's eczema may not necessarily be the reason why your child wakes frequently. If there is no difference in your child's sleep pattern when his / her eczema is bad or good, then it is likely that other factors may be contributing to your child's poor sleep pattern.

Even when you do everything correctly, there will still be occasional bad nights but we hope that the above information will give you some guidance as to how to do the best for your child and to avoid an exhausted family.

For further advice please contact
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For advice on support issues please contact the NSGCCE via the website
www.nottinghameczema.org.uk and click on the contact icon  at the
top of most pages or email us at enquiry@nottinghameczema.org.uk

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