

Sleep disturbance in atopic eczema

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 become sleep deprived and exhausted. It is a miserable experience for your child to wake up with an itchy 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:

1. **Get your child's underlying eczema under better control.**

If it is your child's eczema that is causing him / her to itch and 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 is likely to increase his / her anxiety causing them to scratch more. Treating the underlying itchy red inflammation with topical steroids along with regular moisturisers is really important. At bedtime don't apply the moisturisers thickly as this may overheat your child. Other things that can prevent the skin from being damaged at night from scratching such as bandages, cotton suits or cotton mittens can also be useful. 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.

2. **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 much 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.

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

Develop a good bedtime routine is essential for a good night's sleep. There are many tips on how to get your child off to sleep. Here is what may be useful:

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- Signal the start of bedtime routine, eg. putting toys away, have your child in his/her pajamas
- Safe and quiet environment for your child. Your child's bedroom should ideally be dark, quiet and tidy. It should be well ventilated and kept at a temperature of about 18 to 24C. Consider fitting some thick curtains to block out any daylight or double-glazing to reduce noise.
- A warm (not hot) bath will help your child relax and get ready for sleep.
- Keeping lights dim encourages your child's body to produce the sleep hormone, melatonin.
- Avoid screens in the bedroom. Tablets, smartphones, TVs and other electronic gadgets can affect how easily children get to sleep.
- Once they're in bed, encourage your child to read quietly or listen to some relaxing music, or read a story together

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.

Young babies and infants should always be placed on their back to sleep during day or night and not on their front or side as a part of their sleep routine, as there is good evidence that sleeping on the back reduces the risk of sudden infant death. If your baby has rolled onto their tummy, you should place them on their back. It is best for babies and infants to sleep in a separate cot or Moses basket in same room as parents for first 6 months.

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

Getting your child's eczema under better control is the most important point, so get help from your doctor or nurse if the treatment is not working enough.

There are others things that you can do if you feel helpless in the night when you child is scratching their skin. Application of a cream based moisturiser is 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. Giving you child a cuddle to reassure them before putting them back to bed is fine, but try not to give in to letting your child sleep with you where he/she might overheat and disturb your sleep too.

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.

Further information

Safe sleeping campaign: Lullaby Trust <https://www.lullabytrust.org.uk/safer-sleep-advice/>

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