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WHAT IN THE WORLD IS DERMATITIS?

*Dermatitis is a broad term describing any **inflammation of the skin**. The disorder can have many causes. **Symptoms** include swollen, reddened and itchy skin. A common condition that isn't life-threatening or contagious, it can still make someone affected very uncomfortable and self-conscious. **One type** of dermatitis is **atopic** (no known cause) **dermatitis or eczema**, often found in those with a history of allergy and/or asthma. Unlike asthma and hay fever though, eczema is not usually triggered by allergic reactions to inhaled particles like pollen, mold and dust. In young children with the disorder, eczema symptoms may become worse due to food allergies.

* Dermatitis in the form of **eczema can begin in infancy** or wait until later in childhood or even puberty to start.

Sometimes a very stressful personal event can trigger it in adults with no childhood history of the disease. The rash can be limited to hands or arms, or it can be on the scalp or even the whole body depending on the individual.

* A **chronic** condition, symptoms may be mild most of the time but certain conditions may make symptoms worse: **scratching** your itchy skin **irritates the skin making the itch worse**, setting up a cycle that can drive someone nuts and if the rash and itch is very bad then almost anything can further irritate the skin making it worse, too. Things like household chemicals, fragrant soaps, detergents, solvents, perfumes, scented body lotions or oils, scented deodorant, antiperspirant and even some fabrics like wool will irritate the rash making it, and the itching, worse. Food allergies, contact allergies, sweating, lack of humidity or temperature extremes will also **make symptoms worse**.

* Eczema may also trigger frequent **skin infections** caused by scratching especially if the scratching is so hard the skin is broken. **To help control dermatitis or eczema, stop scratching** the itch, which is easy to say but not to do. Some parents put booties on a baby's hands to help stop the little ones from scratching as hard and some adults wear mittens or gloves to bed to prevent scratching themselves bloody in their sleep. For some, cold compresses help stop the itch.

* Emotional distress doesn't cause eczema or dermatitis but emotions like anger, frustration or embarrassment might cause flushing of the skin and that can make dermatitis symptoms worse.

* The most common **cause for the itch** is that dermatitis patients have very **dry skin**. Their **skin fails to retain water**. Even when moisture is applied, the skin can't absorb enough moisture to stop the symptoms leading to itch.

* **How can you treat dermatitis or eczema itch?** The number one treatment is to get moisture back into the skin and one way to do this is by soaking in a tub of warm, (not hot) water for at least 15 to 20 minutes daily. Use a mild non-drying soap like unscented Dove and don't scrub when washing. Pat dry instead of rubbing dry, then apply moisturizers while the skin is still damp so they soak into the skin, not rest on the surface. This helps seal in the water and makes the skin less red, dry and itchy. Creams and ointments are better than lotions. There are many good brands of moisturizers including Cetaphil, Corn Huskers, Moisturel, Euricin and Vaseline Intensive Care.

* If scratching, itching and rash is out of control or if itching has led to skin infections, then see your healthcare provider for **prescription medications** before things get worse. What **types of medications** may be prescribed?

* **Topical Steroids**. These are steroid medications applied on top of the skin to reduce inflammation. When used correctly, following your healthcare provider's instructions, they are very safe and effective, relieving the rash that causes the itch.

* **TIMS or Topical Immunomodulators** might also be used. Their purpose is to treat inflammation but they are not steroidal medications, meaning there is no danger of side effects that steroids can cause. One common side effect of TIMS, though, is a temporary burning sensation. Two non-steroid creams are Elidel and Protopic.

* **Tar products**: A method used for many decades, these are skin and scalp products that contain coal tar and help reduce the itchy, red and inflamed skin of dermatitis. For most people, tar products have long-lasting results against inflammation with fewer side-effects of other medication products but for some, the coal tar can irritate the skin.

* If you have a scratching-induced skin infection caused by bacteria, a virus or a fungus, there are topical antibiotic, antifungal or antiviral medications that can be applied. Usually these must be used for a long period of time to get results. Some of these medications can also be taken in pill or liquid form. For some patients, oral antihistamines will also reduce the itch. Always work with your healthcare provider to develop your best treatment plan. For more information on asthma and allergy visit www.aafatexas.org or contact info@aafatexas.org

Upcoming AAFA-TX programs: 1) Applications and qualifications for the AAFA-TX Kareem Bacchus Merit Scholarships are available on our website www.aafatexas.org. Completed applications MUST be returned to AAFA-TX before March 15, 2010. 2) **April 9** "Asthma Management & Education" a continuing education program for nurses, respiratory therapists and educators worth 3 CEU. Chicago. Instructor to be announced. Pre-registration required. 3) **May 15** "Manage Adolescent and Adult Asthma with a Team Approach: Apply NHLBI Guideline to Your Practice" a CME symposium worth 4.5 category 1 credits (4.5 AOA category 1-B credits and 4.5 ACPE contact hours) for physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, pharmacists, nurses and respiratory therapists. Arlington, TX. Faculty: William Lumry, MD, Robert Rogers, MD, Eric Schmitt, MD, Richard Herscher, MD. Pre-registration required. To register for this program go to <http://aafatexas.org/registration.htm> Questions? Contact info@aafatexas.org or follow the link on our home page www.aafatexas.org

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