Eczema

Eczema is a common skin condition characterized by an itchy, red rash. Many skin diseases cause somewhat similar rashes, so it is important to have the disease properly diagnosed before it can be treated.

**Dietary changes that may be helpful:** Eczema can be triggered by allergies. Most children with eczema have food allergies, according to data from double blind research. A nutritionally oriented doctor should be consulted to determine if allergies are a factor. Once the trigger for the allergy has been identified, avoidance of the allergen can lead to significant improvement.

It has been reported that when heavy coffee drinkers with eczema avoided coffee, eczema symptoms improved. In this study, the reaction was to coffee—not caffeine, indicating that some people with eczema may be allergic to coffee. People with eczema who are using a hypoallergenic diet (with the guidance of a nutritionally oriented doctor) to investigate food allergies should avoid coffee as part of this trial.

**Nutritional supplements that may be helpful:** Researchers have reported that people with eczema do not have the normal ability to process fatty acids, which can result in a deficiency of gamma-linolenic acid (GLA). GLA is found in evening primrose oil (EPO), borage oil, and black currant seed oil. Most double blind research has
shown that EPO overcomes this block and is useful in the
treatment of eczema.7 8 9 An analysis of nine placebo-
controlled trials reported that effects for reduced itching
were most striking.10 Much of the research uses twelve
pills per day; each pill contains 500 mg of EPO, of which
45 mg is GLA. Smaller amounts have been shown to lack
efficacy.11 One study questioned the effectiveness of
evening primrose oil for treating eczema;12 however, this
negative study has been criticized.13
Borage oil has also been employed for eczema in open
clinical trials, which showed reductions in skin
inflammation, dryness, scaliness, and itch.14 However, a
controlled study using 360 mg of GLA daily from borage in
patients with eczema was unable to reproduce these
results.15

Older reports using large amounts of vegetable oil
(containing precursors to GLA) claimed some success,16
17 but these studies were not controlled and do not meet
modern standards of research. As a result, it makes more
sense to use GLA-containing oils (particularly EPO), rather
than vegetable oil.

Ten grams of fish oil providing 1.8 grams of EPA
(eicosapentaenoic acid) per day were given to a group of
eczema sufferers in a double blind trial. After twelve
weeks, those using the fish oil experienced significant
improvement.18 19 According to the researchers, fish oil
may be effective because it reduces levels of leukotriene
B4, a substance that has been linked to eczema.20 The
eczema-relieving effects of fish oil may require taking ten
pills per day of fish oil taken for at least twelve weeks. Smaller amounts of fish oil have been shown to lack efficacy.21

One trial reporting that fish oil was barely more effective than placebo (30% versus 24% improvement) used vegetable oil as the placebo.22 As vegetable oil has previously been reported to have therapeutic activity, the apparent negative outcome of this trial should not dissuade people with eczema from considering fish oil.

Although vitamin E at 400 IU per day has been reported in anecdotal accounts to alleviate eczema,23 research has not supported this effect.24 Moreover, rare cases of topical vitamin E potentially causing eczema have appeared.25 People with eczema should not expect vitamin E to be helpful with their condition.

In 1989, Medical World News reported that researchers from the University of Texas found that vitamin C, at 50–75 mg per 2.2 pounds of body weight, reduced symptoms of eczema in a double blind trial.26 In theory, vitamin C might be beneficial in treating eczema by affecting the immune system, but further research has yet to investigate any role for this vitamin in people with eczema.

**Are there any side effects or interactions?** Refer to the individual supplement for information about any side effects or interactions.
Herbs that may be helpful: Licorice root, used either internally or topically, may help alleviate symptoms of eczema. A traditional Chinese herbal preparation, which includes licorice, has been successful in treating childhood and adult eczema in double blind studies. The product, known as Zemaphyte, is currently under investigation in England. One or two packets of the combination is mixed in hot water and taken once per day. Topically, glycyrrhetinic acid, a constituent of licorice root, reduces the inflammation and itching associated with eczema. Some doctors who use herbal medicine suggest applying creams or ointments containing glycyrrhetinic acid three or four times per day. Licorice root may also be taken as a tincture in the amount of 2–5 ml three times daily.

Numerous other herbal preparations are used topically to relieve the redness and itching of eczema. A cream prepared with witch hazel and phosphatidyl choline has been reported to be as effective as 1% hydrocortisone in the topical management of eczema, according to one double blind study.

Other topical herbal preparations to consider based on traditional herbal medicine are chamomile, calendula, and chickweed creams. Chamomile and calendula have anti-inflammatory properties, while chickweed is historically used to reduce itching. Research studies have not documented the efficacy of creams of any of these three herbs for people with eczema.
Although burdock root is listed in traditional herbal books for the treatment of eczema, there is little evidence to support its use for this condition. It was used historically on the theory that supporting healthy liver function could help the body to remove potentially skin-damaging compounds from circulation.

Sarsaparilla may be beneficial as an anti-inflammatory based on historical accounts. Capsules or tablets should provide at least 9 grams of the dried root per day, usually taken in divided doses. Tincture is used in the amount of 3 ml three times per day.

In traditional herbal medicine, red clover is considered beneficial for all manner of chronic conditions, particularly those afflicting the skin. However, the mechanism of action and responsible constituents for red clover’s purported benefit in skin conditions is unknown. Wild oats has historically been used to treat a variety of skin conditions, including eczema, but it, too, is without scientific investigation.

Tannins, the main therapeutic component of oak bark, bind liquids, absorb toxins, and soothe inflamed tissues. For eczema characterized by oozing or weeping, oak is applied topically by first boiling 1–2 U.S. tablespoons (15–30 grams) of the bark for fifteen minutes in 500 ml (2 cups) of water. After cooling, a cloth is dipped into the liquid and applied directly to the rash several times a day. The liquid prepared this way in the morning can be used throughout the day; unused portions should be discarded after that.
This approach has been helpful in clinical practice but has yet to be scrutinized scientifically.

**Are there any side effects or interactions?** Refer to the individual herb for information about any side effects or interactions.

**References:**
