

AD / ECZEMA / ATOPIC ECZEMA (AE) /  
BESNIER PRURIGO

# Atopic dermatitis

## CATEGORY:

## Rashes / Eczemas

### LOOKS LIKE:

Red or purple/dark colour; scratched; bumpy; sometimes crusty or blistered

### FEELS LIKE:

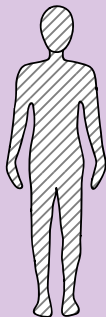
Dry, itchy; can be scaly or thickened

### FLARE-UP PREVENTION:

Avoid skin dryness and known triggers

### LOCATION:

Anywhere but most commonly in the folds of the elbows and knees, the neck, wrists, and on the face and hands



## WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE —



Thickening and darkening of skin in long-term eczema



Redness, skin thickening, and scaling in toddler's elbow crease



Facial eczema in a baby – a common location for early eczema



Thickening, redness, and cracks over the fingers of a 12-year-old with eczema



Scratched eczema behind the knees



Eyelid eczema in a young teenager

## What is it?

Atopic dermatitis (AD), also called eczema, is a common skin condition that causes dryness, itch, and rash. Although it can affect people of any age, it often starts in early childhood, and may settle down in adolescence.

People with other allergic diseases such as hayfever, asthma, and food allergies are more likely to get atopic dermatitis. An increased chance of getting these conditions runs in some families (inherited / genetic), which is called atopy.

Atopic dermatitis is not contagious and cannot spread between people.

# Atopic dermatitis

## CAUSES —

It is not fully understood why some people develop atopic dermatitis.

Contributing factors may include:

- An overactive immune system
- Skin structure — affecting how well it functions as a barrier to the outside world
- Differences in the micro-organisms (eg, bacteria) that naturally live on our skin surface
- Exposure to environmental factors.

Flare-ups of eczema can be related to changes in climate (eg, heat and humidity) or diet; stress; infections; and environmental triggers such as dust mites, grass, pet hair, scented soaps, or chlorinated swimming pools.

## SYMPTOMS —

Generally, there are periods where symptoms settle (remission), or flare-up (relapse). These symptoms can vary but the affected skin may become:

- **Dry** — a sign of the loss of barrier function
- **Red** with a rash
- **Itchy**, and may bleed when scratched
- Crusty/weepy, and may blister
- Thickened, scaly, or cracked over time
- Darker or lighter compared to unaffected skin.

Atopic dermatitis can come up anywhere on the body, often affecting the face, neck, and inside creases of elbows and knees. Hand dermatitis is also commonly seen in adults.

## COMPLICATIONS —

- Skin infections — from bacteria, viruses, or fungi. Dry, irritated, scratched skin is more easily infected.
- Difficulty sleeping — due to itching and scratching.
- Negative self-esteem — due to skin appearance.

## DIAGNOSIS —

Your doctor will assess your skin and ask you some questions. Often this is all that is needed for a diagnosis.

Tests are sometimes done to look for other conditions. These may include skin swabs or scrapings to test for infection, blood tests, patch tests (various substances applied to the skin for allergy testing), or a skin sample (biopsy).

## TREATMENT —

To prevent flare-ups:

- **Moisturise** regularly to prevent dryness
- Use **soap substitutes** and avoid hot showers/baths
- Avoid triggers known to irritate the skin eg, certain fabrics or chemicals
- Avoid scratching — keep fingernails clean and short; and consider physical barriers eg, gloves.

Relieving symptoms and treating flare-ups might involve:

- **Steroid creams**, gels, or lotions for inflammation
- Sedating antihistamines for night-time itch
- Antibiotics for infection.

In severe cases, treatment might also involve:

- Phototherapy (light therapy)
- Steroids — taken by mouth or given by injection
- Other medications that calm down the immune system (eg, methotrexate, ciclosporin, pimecrolimus, JAK inhibitors, dupilumab).

## OUTCOME —

Atopic dermatitis can improve or even clear up over time, however it may reappear or persist in adult life. In most cases, it can be managed with active treatment when needed, along with strategies to prevent flare-ups. Sensitive skin usually continues for life.



### MORE INFORMATION —

<https://dermnetnz.org/topics/atopic-dermatitis>

