

# ECZEMA AND BATHING



**Bath Additives for the Treatment  
of childhood Eczema**



## **Eczema and bathing**

Bathing and cleaning is an important part of looking after a child with eczema. There are lots of possible benefits: removing dirt, irritants and allergens from the skin surface, softening the skin by helping it to take up water, establishing a routine, giving play opportunities, providing a bonding activity between young children with eczema and their carers, and reducing stress through relaxing. But bathing can also dry out the skin and make it itch more if care is not given to applying plenty of emollients (moisturisers) to the skin after bathing. Skin does not have to feel dry and tight to be 'clean'.

### **Shower or bath?**

There is no right or wrong answer to this question. It is much easier to bath a baby or toddler. Older children and adolescents tend to prefer showers. The important point is what you do to the skin when you get out of the bath or shower.

### **Temperature**

Use warm rather than hot water. The hotter the water, the more damaging it is to the skin because very hot water takes away all the precious skin oils and also makes the skin more irritable and likely to itch. Equally, the water should be warm enough for the child to be comfortable. Some people have advocated lukewarm water, but lukewarm water is a miserable experience.

### **How long to soak**

A child should not spend too long in the bath. But equally, the child can still have time to play and enjoy the experience. About 15 minutes is about right.

### **Soap substitute**

Children with eczema should avoid soaps, bubble baths and shower gels because they dry out and can irritate the skin. Emollients (prescribed moisturisers) can be used instead.

## Shampoo

National guidance advises not to use a shampoo for a child under one year of age. Up until this age, using an emollient as a shampoo substitute is advised. If this continues to suit the child, there is no need to change. If you feel you want to use a shampoo, find one that claims to be suitable for eczema. If you use a shampoo when showering, try not to let it run on to the body. Another way to avoid shampoo running onto the body is to lean over an empty bath and wash the hair using a shower head there so that all the suds run off into the bath rather than onto your skin.

## Frequency of washing

This is one of those areas where different health care professionals will tell you different things. Generally the advice is that bathing should be no more than once daily but might be less than this. Go with whatever is comfortable for you and your child. And of course, exposure to dirt and irritants may vary from day to day, and this may change the bathing frequency too. Just as the time of year may affect bathing frequency, if a child gets sweatier in the summer for instance. Whilst bathing should not be more than once daily, cleaning a baby's face, hands and bottom may need to be more often!

## Timing in the day

Some recommend that you perform your bathing and moisturizing at night just before going to bed. You are unlikely to further dry out or irritate your skin while sleeping, so the moisture can be more thoroughly absorbed into your skin.

## After bathing or showering

This is the most important bit of advice regarding bathing. Whenever your child has bathed or showered or been in contact with water, the skin should be gently patted dry with a soft towel **followed by plenty of your child's chosen emollient applied directly to the skin.**

## Stinging

If your child has lots of broken skin, water can cause temporary stinging. This may be helped by applying moisturisers before the bath. If this doesn't work then seek advice from your doctor as your child may need stronger eczema treatment or antibiotics.

## Water softeners

Although the hardness of mains water may affect the severity of eczema, a recent national study led from Nottingham study has shown that water softeners are not helpful for improving eczema.

## Wet wipes

We do not recommend wet wipes as they often contain ingredients to which you can become allergic.

## Other Advice

When using emollients in the bath or shower it is important that you clean the bath or shower afterwards. There are several reasons for this, the oils and grease can build up making the bath very slippery. We would recommend using washing up liquid, hot water and a soft cloth or brush to clean the area. Rinse well to remove all the detergent and dry with kitchen towel. Also it helps to clear the drains.

- Do not leave lids off pots of emollients as this could be another source of infection.
- Don't use flannels that have been left damp on the side of bath as these may be another source of infection.
- If using bath toys, grease may build up on them so wash in hot soapy water or dish washer.

## More about Eczema

### What is eczema?

Eczema is inflammation of the skin which gives it a red, dry and flaky appearance. Many children with eczema suffer from itching and poor sleep, but this should improve as you gain control over the eczema.

### What causes eczema?

There is no single cause of eczema. We know that eczema can run in families, so a child with a family history of eczema, asthma or hay fever may be more at risk of developing eczema. A number of things in the environment can set off eczema in some children. These triggers are not always allergies. Irritation from soaps, wearing non-cotton clothing, overheating at night and contact with water are all important in eczema. Dry skin can be the first sign of eczema. Giving the skin extra help with emollient moisturisers at this stage can help prevent the skin from becoming red and itchy.

### Can eczema be cured?

Unfortunately there is no cure for eczema at present. The good news is that 2 out of 3 children who have eczema will grow out of it by the age of 11. In the meantime, there is a lot you can do to manage eczema and control flare-ups so your child can enjoy life.

### Caring for a child with eczema

There is no right or wrong way of managing eczema. Every skin responds to different things, and different emollient moisturisers and skin care routines will suit different people. **The important thing is finding something that works for you.** Finding the right emollient for you and your child is very important. It helps protect the skin and many children find it soothing.

## What are emollient moisturisers?

Emollients are moisturisers that have been specifically designed for eczema. They are more natural than most cosmetic moisturisers as they contain less or no colours or perfumes. There are 3 main types:

1. Leave-on emollients      Where emollients are applied to the skin and left to soak in
2. Bath emollients              Oil and/or emulsifiers that disperse in the bath
3. Soap substitutes            Where emollients are used instead of soap or other washing products

Skin experts agree that **using leave-on emollients regularly** is the most important part of daily care for eczema. In eczema the protective skin barrier is damaged, both in areas where you can see eczema and in areas where the skin looks clear. Emollients protect this top layer of skin by covering it with a protective coat. This forms a barrier against infection and helps control itching. Using emollients at least twice a day on all areas of the skin can dampen down the eczema process and also prevent future flare-ups.

There is much less certainty about whether adding emollients to the bath helps to protect the skin in the same way as applying them directly to the skin.

## How can I find the right emollient for my child?

There is a huge variety of emollients available in the UK. They come as ointments, creams, lotions, gels and sprays. Ointments are usually greasy and see-through. They are generally better as they last longer on the skin and give better results on very dry skin. Creams and lotions are white and contain water so they are easier to rub in. Some people find these more pleasant to put on, but they don't last as long on the skin so need to be used more often than ointments.

It doesn't really matter which emollient your child uses as long as it is used regularly. You may need to try out different emollients until you find one that works for you and your child. You can discuss this with your GP, who can prescribe them for your child. You can also ask your pharmacist for advice.

### Where can I find out more about eczema?

The Nottingham Support Group for Carers of Children with eczema – click on 'information' for high quality information on a wide range of topics:

<http://www.nottinghameczema.org.uk>

The National Eczema Society offers a telephone helpline and a list of local groups:

<http://www.eczema.org/>

This leaflet is based on information 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

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