

# A Lifetime of Itchy

By Suze Hargraves

I am an itch expert. I've been itching since I was an infant. Picturesque baby that I was, I was covered in eczema at birth. They air brushed my baby picture. You think I'm kidding? I wish I was. Itching has been part of my life since day one. Managing the itch has been a quest since day two.

Your skin is the largest organ in your body and it has three main functions:

1. Protective – your skin's main job is to insulate and protect the body against invasion by bacteria and other foreign things.
2. Sensory – the skin can sense 5 different kinds of stimulation: touch, pressure, heat, cold, and pain.
3. Regulatory – the skin helps to control body temperature by distributing heat through the skin and by preventing dehydration. (<http://www.healthunit.org/sunsafety/aboutskin.htm>)

You can see that having a "skin condition" is not just a matter of appearance; it's a matter of overall good health.

Eczema, according to WebMD, is a term for a group of medical conditions that cause the skin to become inflamed or irritated. There are several types of eczema with the most common being "atopic dermatitis". The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease reports that atopic dermatitis affects from 9 to 30% of the U.S. population. Some children will outgrow eczema by their second birthday. Others, like me, will find themselves engaged in the lifelong battle against the itch.

Most folks who have eczema have "flare-ups". These episodes can be caused by chemicals, fabrics, allergies, temperatures, animals, emotions or even colds. Stress causes flare-ups in everyone I know who has eczema including myself. So what's the connection between the flare and the triggers? Each person is different. For some of us, flares are caused by exposure to a single trigger. For others, flares stem from any and all of the above potential triggers. Identifying and avoiding personal triggers is key to the management of eczema.

Finding your triggers is a process of elimination. You have to watch your skin's responses to conditions and substances. Try keeping a journal of your symptoms, changes in your life and environment then discuss them with your healthcare provider. Many eczema sufferers find that relaxation techniques and other non-medicinal tactics are extremely helpful in preventing flares. Your awareness and active participation will help you and your provider develop a strong eczema management program.

There is a time in every eczema patient's life when home remedies, good skin care and over the counter medicines just don't work. Although over the counter hydrocortisone creams can help with minor flares, once a flare becomes a full-fledged fire, you need to check in with your healthcare provider. There are stronger creams on the market that may help ease your flare. Your provider may prescribe oral corticosteroids (i.e. prednisone) and, if your rash becomes infected, antibiotics. Antihistamines in varying strengths can help reduce severe itching.

There are two creams, preventative in nature, which every eczema patient needs to know about: Elidel and Protopic. Both of these work by altering the immune system response. According to WebMD, "As of January 2006, these two creams carry the FDA's strongest "black box" warning on their packaging to alert doctors and patients to these potential risks. The warning advises doctors to prescribe short-term use of Elidel and Protopic only after other available eczema treatments have failed in adults and children over the age of 2." If your medical provider recommends one of these creams be sure to discuss the risks vs. benefits to your long term health.

Management of eczema requires patient participation and responsibility. Don't fool around with miracle

cures and discuss all alternative treatments with your primary healthcare provider before investing in a product or services that could damage your skin or your health permanently. Having eczema can be both embarrassing and frustrating, but harming yourself in the quest for a cure would be much worse.

Be gentle with your skin. For better or for worse, it's all we have to keep it all together.

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