

## Michigan Avenue Internists, LLC

Affiliated with Northwestern Memorial Hospital

### Atopic Dermatitis

#### What is Atopic Dermatitis?

Atopic dermatitis (eczema) presents as dry, itchy, red, scaly skin patches.

#### What causes Atopic Dermatitis?

The exact cause is not yet known. Some people are more likely to develop atopic dermatitis, particularly if other family members have had it, or if there is a family history of asthma or hay fever. Atopic dermatitis is not infectious. Skin becomes red and inflamed, which impairs its normal functioning as a protective barrier. The rash may involve only the face or it may cover a large part of the body. It is commonly on the legs, feet, hands and arms. It also is seen in the bends of the skin around the elbows, knees and neck.

External factors can make atopic dermatitis worse. These include exposure to detergents, chemicals, rough clothing, dust mite allergy, and cat/dog hair. Certain types of food may have some role in young children with mild to severe eczema. Feeling unwell or getting stressed may also cause it to flare up. The more a person scratches the affected area, the worse it will become.

Sometimes, atopic dermatitis becomes infected by bacteria, yeast or viruses. This is called “secondary infection”. The rash gets very red with pus-pimples and scabs. If this occurs, your doctor will prescribe an antibiotic to control the infection. Certain viruses, such as the “cold sore” or herpes simplex virus can cause a more serious complication. This may cause a severe rash. **If this happens, contact your doctor immediately.**

#### How is atopic dermatitis treated?

Atopic dermatitis cannot be cured, but it can be controlled. General measures include avoiding known irritants (such as animal hair, strong soaps, etc) and wearing soft, cotton clothing. Most patients have mild to moderate cases and treatment applied directly to the skin (topical therapy) is usually sufficient. Topical therapy consists of creams such as emollients (to moisten the skin and reduce skin scaling), barrier cream (to prevent water loss and protect the skin) and steroid cream (to reduce inflammation). Antibiotics may be required if secondary skin infection has occurred. Anti-histamines can help to reduce itching and allow sleep.

#### Controlling Atopic Dermatitis:

- Avoid scratchy clothing and any substances known to cause itching (i.e. soaps, detergents, perfumes, dust, wools).
- Shower or bathe daily with luke warm water. Keep baths and showers to less than 10 minutes. Use a non-drying soap in the shower such as Cetaphil Gentle Skin Cleanser.
- After bath/shower pat dry with towel and then apply lubricant to entire body. CeraVe Moisturizing Cream(available at CVS Pharmacy) is recommended as a full body lubricant. Always choose creams (i.e cetaphil/eucerin) or ointments (aquaphor); NOT lotions.
- Keep household temperatures constant by using a vaporizer in winter and air conditioner in summer. Thoroughly maintain humidifiers to avoid mold growth.
- Do not scratch affected areas. Keep nails short and well filed.
- Use cortisone-derived ointments for flare-ups as directed by your doctor. When the area is clear, discontinue cortisone but remain vigilant about using cream lubrication 1-2 times daily.
- If a severe rash develops, **contact your doctor immediately.** An antibiotic may be given to control secondary infections.