Balmonds

Skin Conditions Guide

What are skin conditions?

What causes them?

What can you do about them?



(Click topic to go directly to the page)



Atopic Eczema



Childhood Eczema



Psoriasis



Rosacea



Dyshidrosis



Contact Dermatitis



Topical Steroid Withdrawal



Acne



Venous Eczema



Perioral Dermatitis



Seborrheic Dermatitis



Ichthyosis

(Click topic to go directly to the page)

1. **Introduction** 4

2. **Skin Condition Directory**

What Is Atopic Eczema? 5

What Is Childhood Eczema? 8

What Is Psoriasis? 11

What Is Rosacea? 13

What Is Dyshidrosis? 16

What Is Contact Dermatitis? 18

What Is Topical Steroid Withdrawal Syndrome? 20

What Is Acne? 23

What Is Venous Eczema? 25

What is Perioral Dermatitis? 27

What Is Seborrheic Dermatitis? 30

What Is Ichthyosis? 32

3. **Nutrition and Your Skin** 34
By Jennifer Fugo Ms, Cns, Ldn

4. **Managing Childhood Eczema** 41
By Zoe T. Williams

5. **Allergies and Your Skin** 45
By Ruth Holroyd

6. **Building A Skincare Regime with Sensitive Skin** 52
by Dr Sina Ghadiri

7. **Going Clean:** 57
Ingredients to Avoid if you have Sensitive Skin

8. **Stress & Your Skin:** 61
Wellness Strategies for Skin Conditions

8. **Making your Home Skin Condition-Friendly** 65

9. **Teenage Skin** 69

10. **Resources** 72

1. Introduction

At Balmonds, we understand the need for clear, honest and sympathetic information about skin, both for those living with chronic skin conditions, and those caring for them.

That's why we label our products in simple English, offer our customers friendly support, and provide a wealth of informative articles on our **online info hub**. And that's also why we've put together the Balmonds Skin Condition Guide, as a useful guide for parents, friends, healthcare professionals and those living with skin conditions alike.

It begins with a concise index of twelve common skin conditions, while in the second half of the guide you'll find expert advice from acclaimed nutritionist **Jennifer Fugo**, award-winning eczema blogger **Ruth Holroyd**, allergy campaigner **Zoe T Williams**, and dermatologist **Dr Sina Ghadiri**, as well as articles with information and a wealth of tips for keeping your skin as happy and healthy as possible!



Back to contents page



What is Atopic Eczema?

Atopic eczema (or atopic dermatitis) is a chronic inflammatory skin condition which manifests as rashes, bumps, scaly skin, blisters or spots. It's a condition that involves a faulty skin barrier as well as a variety of contributing factors.

Causes

It's unclear what the root cause of atopic eczema is, although it appears to be a combination of things. Some people are born with less elasticity in their skin - it's a faulty gene whose job it is to produce a protein called filaggrin which is responsible for about 10% of the population being more vulnerable to developing eczema.

There are also environmental factors at play: eczema is worse at some times of the year than others, and is affected by things like house dust, wind chill, temperature, humidity, cleaning products, soap, different foods, etc.

Finally there are psychological factors to take into account; stress and sleeplessness have significant effects on skin.

Atopic eczema comes in waves or flares

Atopic eczema comes and goes in waves or flares; it's not something that can be cured as such, but a successful management plan aims to make flares less likely to occur, and if they do, to make them less severe and last less long.

Flares are often a result of a conjunction of one, two or three triggers which overwhelm defence mechanisms. For example, while you might sometimes be able to tolerate the cold weather without flaring up, but if you're also stressed, tired, and have been using an irritating hand wash, you might find your hands breaking out in eczema.

Managing the condition

Managing eczema-prone skin takes a variety of different strategies, but the frontline of eczema management is keeping skin well moisturised. An occlusive (waterproof) barrier cream or ointment has the double benefit of preventing moisture loss so skin doesn't dry out any more, but it'll also protect against irritating substances getting through the damaged epidermis and triggering an inflammatory reaction. Inflammation causes itchiness and scratching, and yet more damage to already fragile skin, so it's best avoided if possible!

Other than regular moisturising, managing eczema centres around avoiding triggers and boosting overall health, so your body is in a more resilient state to combat inflammation when it happens.

Keep eczema-prone skin:

- ✓ Hydrated with moisturisers
- ✓ Nourished with nutrients
- ✓ Protected from irritants

Top tips

- Identify your own particular triggers and avoid them!
- Stress is one of the most significant triggers for flares
- Eczema is not just skin deep: it helps to work on your overall well-being as well as applying emollients
- A flare-up is often the combination of several triggers: central heating + pet hair + stress = dehydration & inflammation

Summary

Eczema comes and goes in flares, and while the condition cannot be cured, a successful management plan aims to make flares less likely to occur, and if they do, to make them less severe and last less long.





What is Childhood Eczema?

Atopic eczema in childhood is an extremely common skin condition in little children.
1 in 5 children have some symptoms of eczema, and the numbers of babies who get the dry, crusty or rashy skin that characterises the condition are in the millions worldwide.

Causes

The good news is that most cases of baby eczema are relatively mild. Patches of dry or scaly skin on the cheeks, behind the knees and in the creases of the wrists are common symptoms of eczema in little ones.

And while babies with eczema might flare-up in reaction to irritants they've come into contact with (like bubble baths, pet hair, or laundry detergents), their eczema can mostly be well-managed with emollients.

Unfortunately some babies develop more serious cases of eczema, and can be very badly affected indeed. Itchy from head to toe and covered in scratches from desperate attempts to soothe the uncomfortable feeling, a baby with bad childhood eczema is an upsetting sight, and can seem to be reacting to everything they come into contact with.

When a baby suffers, the whole household suffers; from sleep-deprived parents who have to stay up all night to calm an itchy baby, to siblings who find themselves not getting the attention they need and who are themselves upset by their constantly crying little brother or sister.

The good news is that eczema eventually resolves for most children. The majority of babies with eczema grow out of the condition within five years, so that by the time they're school-age their skin is mostly clear. The sensitive skin of a newborn, which is so susceptible to irritants when brand new, becomes resilient enough in time to cope better with triggers.

Although children who suffer from childhood eczema are likely to be prone to dry or sensitive skin as they grow up, for most the painful flares of their baby years will eventually be a distant memory.

Common culprits for flares include:

- Pet dander
- House dust mites
- Laundry detergent
- Bath time toiletries
- Bacterial or yeast infections
- Hot, synthetic, itchy clothes
- Dry air in the house
- Food sensitivities

Top tips

- Look at what might be causing flares in your home
- It’s hard work looking after a little one with eczema: take time for yourself to fill up your batteries!
- Invest in eczema-friendly clothing to reduce overheating and itchiness
- Be infection-aware: look out for and treat any signs of infected eczema
- Avoid bubbly washes and long, hot baths: keep bathtime brief, warm and suds-free!
- Break the itch-scratch cycle with safe scratchers, scratch mitts, distraction or cold compresses

Summary

Emollients are only one strategy for managing eczema; you’ll also need to work out what’s causing the flare and avoid it so that damaged skin can repair and regenerate, because however much moisturiser you apply, if the cause of the itchiness is still present, skin will have a hard time healing.





What is Psoriasis?

Psoriasis is a chronic inflammatory autoimmune condition that causes the excess production of skin cells. It's also a condition which is more than skin deep: although psoriasis is classed as a skin disease, the inflammation it causes can also affect the joints, arteries and other internal organs.

There are several different variations of psoriasis, with plaque psoriasis being by far the most common; something like 90% of all psoriasis sufferers have this type.

Plaque psoriasis is characterised by patches of raised, scaly skin, often different in tone and colour to the surrounding, unaffected, skin. These plaques can be thick, itchy and crusty and tend to be found on the knees, elbows, scalp and around the hairline, but can appear anywhere.

Psoriasis, like other skin conditions, appears differently on different skin colours. On skin of colour, the plaques might be purple or brown, and the silvery scales that appear pink or red on paler skin are more likely to be lilac or grey. Skin of colour is also more prone to post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation after a prolonged psoriasis flare, a lingering discolouration which appears darker than surrounding skin.

While everyone is different, common triggers for psoriasis flares include stress; cold, dry weather; smoking; alcohol; infections; ingredients such as harsh perfumes and preservatives in toiletries.

Triggers for psoriasis include:

- stress
- cold, dry weather
- smoking
- alcohol
- infections
- perfumes
- synthetic preservatives

Management of psoriasis revolves around avoiding triggers for flares and keeping skin well moisturised. There are also various medical treatments your doctor might offer to control your condition, including topical steroids, calcineurin inhibitors, Vitamin D, coal tar, and phototherapy, and biologics such as Methotrexate.

Top tips

- **Psoriasis is not just skin deep**
- **Make a management plan to look after yourself holistically**
- **Keep a flare diary and track what triggers a flare**
- **Keep skincare simple and irritant-free**

"Management of psoriasis revolves around avoiding triggers for flares and keeping skin well moisturised."



What is Rosacea?

Rosacea is a progressive inflammatory skin condition, affecting the central part of the face, the cheeks, forehead, chin, and nose. Despite the root cause of rosacea being unclear, rosacea is a very common skin condition, which affects an estimated 1 in 10 people.

Mild rosacea can come and go over a period of time, and can look like sunburn or blushing in fair-skinned people. The redness appears as a consequence of excess blood flowing rapidly through the blood vessels of the face, which enlarge and widen to cope with the increased blood flow. The skin of the face can be extra sensitive, so applying makeup or creams can feel uncomfortable or sting.

Rosacea occurs more frequently in certain sections of the population, with those prone to rosacea including people who are fair-skinned, female, between 30-50 years old, of celtic ancestry, prone to acne in earlier years, blonde or red-headed, blue-eyed, related to other rosacea sufferers, and who blush easily. That's not to say that rosacea doesn't affect other demographics too; in fact it can end up going undiagnosed because someone doesn't fit the stereotype of a rosacea patient and a flare doesn't show up as easily on their skin.

Common culprits for rosacea flares include:

- alcohol
- strenuous exercise
- cold weather
- changes in temperature
- stress
- medication
- irritating cosmetics or toiletries
- spicy food
- hot weather/sunshine
- wind
- hot drinks
- intense emotions
- hormonal changes

Although they won't affect everyone to the same extent and vary from person to person, the most common culprits for rosacea flares are the same for many: alcohol; spicy food; exercise; hot weather and sunshine; cold weather; wind; changes in temperature; hot drinks; stress; intense emotions; irritating cosmetics or toiletries; medication; hormonal changes.

"Rosacea can be a progressive condition so it's important to manage it by reducing the likelihood and severity of flares."

Everyone's different - what flares one person might not affect you.

In severe cases symptoms can become permanent, so it's important to manage the condition. A management plan could involve making dietary changes, avoiding your triggers, changing your skincare regime, limiting sun exposure, and managing stress.

Medical treatments for more severe cases could include oral antibiotics; antimicrobial treatments for demodex or bacterial overgrowth; beta-blockers for debilitating blushing; or anti-inflammatories such as Isotretinoin (aka Accutane).

Top tips

- Pick extra-gentle skincare to nourish skin rather than inflame it
- Be aware of what food and drink sets off a rosacea flush for you
- Be extra careful around sun exposure - wide brimmed hats & sunscreen are your friends



What is Dyshidrosis?

Also known as pompholyx or dyshidrotic eczema, dyshidrosis usually starts on the palms of the hands and the sides of the fingers, or the soles of the feet and toes. It causes intense itchiness, then the breakout out of lots of tiny, fluid-filled blisters. The itching can drive sufferers to distraction, and can also be felt as burning or stinging sensations. As the blisters start to subside and dry out, the skin can get cracked and sore, and is vulnerable to infection and sensitive to any kind of irritant. Water, soap, cleaners etc can all sting on contact.

It is unclear exactly what causes dyshidrosis, although things which can trigger or exacerbate a flare up include stress; irritants such as household detergents, sanitiser, soap, chemicals, toiletries; sweat or getting overheated; fungal infections; frequent hand washing; smoking.

The main strategy for treating the condition is to avoid things that make it worse, and looking after the skin so it can heal itself eventually. That means working out what makes your skin flare up, and trying your best to avoid it, as well as using emollients to reduce the itchiness, protect your skin from irritants, and support the skin barrier to heal.

Dyshidrosis can be confused with other skin conditions which cause blisters, such as impetigo, contact dermatitis, and hand, foot and mouth disease, so get a diagnosis from a doctor if you're unsure.

Common culprits for dyshidrosis flares include:

- stress
- detergents
- soap
- toiletries
- frequent hand washing
- sweat or getting overheated
- household chemicals
- hand sanitiser
- industrial chemicals
- fungal infections
- smoking

Top tips

- **Hands prone to dyshidrosis need protecting from irritants with gloves and barrier creams**
- **Even plain water can be a trigger for a flare, as it can dehydrate and damage the skin**
- **Supporting the skin barrier function so skin can heal is key to managing the condition**
- **Stick to simple, unperfumed, ph-neutral washes**



7. What is Contact Dermatitis?

Dermatitis is a catch-all term for skin irritation anywhere on the body, and there are several different kinds. Some are caused by direct contact and others caused by more abstract things, like the weather or anxiety, but they all involve the skin getting inflamed, damaged, and itchy.

Unlike eczema - aka atopic dermatitis - contact dermatitis isn't a chronic condition; it's limited by time and area of the body affected. That's because contact dermatitis is triggered by a substance (pollen, nickel, perfume, detergent or other irritants) coming into contact with your skin and damaging the skin barrier. This allows irritants into the body, and triggers inflammation.

This kind of dermatitis tends to resolve in time as the skin barrier repairs itself, but can be more persistent if whatever caused the flare-up of inflammation is still present. For example, if you continue to wear a watch strap that's rubbing your wrist and causing inflammation, or always wear the same earrings made with nickel, the dermatitis will keep recurring.

For that reason, treatment of contact dermatitis focuses on identifying and removing (or limiting) the causes of irritation, keeping the skin moisturised and healthy. You may need to wear protective clothing to prevent your skin coming into contact with the substances that affect your skin, or use emollients to reduce skin dryness and support the repair of the skin barrier function.

Common culprits for contact dermatitis include:

- nickel
- detergent
- disinfectants
- plants, especially sap
- synthetic additives in cosmetics
- industrial chemicals
- sweat
- cement
- perfume/fragranced toiletries
- prolonged contact with water

"Contact dermatitis is triggered by an irritant coming into contact with your skin and damaging the skin barrier. Irritants in the blood stream then trigger an inflammatory response and cause itchy rashes."

Top tips

- **Try anti-itch strategies to limit the damage to itchy broken skin: cold compresses, safe scratch devices, wrapping the area, cooling lotions like calamine**
- **The most effective treatment for contact dermatitis is removing the source of the irritation!**
- **Protect skin from contact with gloves, masks, and/or a barrier salve**
- **Dry your hands after contact with water or chemicals and apply an unscented moisturiser**



What is Topical Steroid Withdrawal Syndrome?

TSW (also known as topical steroid withdrawal syndrome, red skin syndrome or RSS) is a condition that affects people who have stopped using topical steroids after a period of using them to manage inflammatory skin conditions like eczema.

Withdrawal from steroid use affects the way the body reacts after it has become reliant on steroids to manage its inflammatory response.

Symptoms of TSW can be distressing and uncomfortable, and are likely to include the following:

- extreme shedding of skin
- redness on face and body
- oozing skin
- nerve pain
- intense skin sensitivity
- difficulty regulating body temperature leading to chills/overheating
- night sweats
- insomnia
- hair loss
- oedema/swelling
- enlarged lymph nodes
- dry irritated eyes
- decreased energy levels/extreme tiredness
- mood swings or depression

Topical corticosteroid creams are routinely prescribed to help calm down inflammation, itchiness and rashes, particularly those associated with eczema and psoriasis. They can be very effective in reducing the risk of infection and in soothing the distress and damage of intense itchiness.

"Topical Steroid Withdrawal Syndrome is a collection of uncomfortable symptoms that can occur when people stop using topical steroids to manage inflammation."

However, many people experiencing RSS/TSA describe the symptoms as being much worse than the eczema they'd first used steroids to control; they might also find that their condition needs stronger and stronger

potencies of steroids to control, or that steroids are not having any effect on flare-ups. They describe the intense burning feeling on areas of the body (ie face and arms) they haven't so far had eczema as being a distinctly different sensation than itchy, dry, eczema flare-ups.

Managing the symptoms of TSWS generally means finding strategies to make yourself more comfortable, reducing the itch with cool packs or distraction techniques, keeping fragile/broken skin clean and free from infections, getting as much good sleep as possible, making sure you're eating nutritious foods, resting and keeping your temperature regulated.

Coping with a TSW flare:

- Wear layers of loose comfortable cotton clothing
- Check out ITSAN.org for support and advice
- Keep your skin cool and protected
- Steer clear of perfumes, soap, harsh preservatives, & other irritants

Top tips

- **Find your community: the support of people who know what you're going through is vital**
- **TSW takes time: give yourself time to heal**
- **A damaged skin barrier is more vulnerable to microbes so keep an eye out for infection during TSW**
- **TSW is not just skin deep: your body will need to be rested, nourished, looked after**



What is Acne?

Acne is a skin condition caused by excess sebum (the skin's natural oil) blocking follicles, causing bumps, inflammation and infection. It can manifest as various kinds of spots - whiteheads, blackheads, papules, pustules, nodules or cysts - some of which are pus-filled. Acne tends to start gradually and worsen, and isn't usually itchy.

Acne usually starts in puberty, and coincides with hormonal changes. It can last until people are about 30, and is very common; about 90% of people suffer from acne to some extent while they're growing up.

"Acne flares can be triggered or aggravated by factors like irritants in skincare, diet and stress."

Spots and breakouts can occur wherever the skin produces the natural oil (aka sebum) it uses to lubricate and strengthen its barrier function. This means as well as the oily area of the face, you can get acne on your chest, back, neck, shoulders and anywhere there are sebaceous glands.

Acne is usually seen as a hormonal condition, in which puberty affects the sebum production and causes excess oiliness in sebaceous glands. While acne can be aggravated by toiletries and diet, these are not root causes so much as contributing factors or triggers for flares.

Managing mild breakouts involves looking after your skin, keeping it clean, nourished and calm. Use non-irritating toiletries and moisturisers, try to keep stress levels low, nourish your body and let it rest! In most cases, acne resolves itself without medical treatment, but doctors can prescribe topical remedies such as retinoids, salicylic acids, antibiotics, as well as light therapy, peels, hormone treatments, or drainage.

Options for medical treatments include:

- retinoids
- antibiotics
- peels
- salicylic acids
- light therapy
- hormone treatment

Top tips

- **Tips for managing acne-prone skin**
- **Keep your skin clean with gentle cleansers**
- **Nourish yourself inside and out with good food**
- **Stress can be a trigger for acne flares**
- **Even if your skin is oily, it still needs a moisturiser!**



What is Venous Eczema?

Varicose eczema, also known as venous stasis dermatitis or gravitational eczema, is a skin condition affecting the lower legs.

Varicose eczema appears as itchy, inflamed, dry and swollen legs, possibly accompanied by changes in skin colouring and red spots, scaling, weeping and/or crusting.

It usually affects elderly people with circulation problems, as it's a complication of venous insufficiency, when the valves in your veins don't move blood back up your legs. Pressure builds up, congestion increases, and not enough oxygen and blood can reach the skin to keep it healthy.

"Venous eczema can happen when the valves in your veins don't move blood back up your legs, and your skin doesn't get enough oxygen and nutrients to stay healthy."

You're more likely to get venous stasis dermatitis if you have high blood pressure, varicose veins, weight problems, heart conditions, kidney failure, blood clots, especially in your leg; multiple pregnancies; past surgeries or injuries on your legs/feet; mobility issues and are spending much of your time sitting down or standing still.

Alongside other measures to control venous eczema - weight management, elevating the lower legs, compression stockings, etc. - it's important to look after the affected skin with effective, non-irritant emollients. Eczema can start to develop on other parts of the body alongside varicose eczema, so good all-over skin health is really important. Keep your skin well moisturised at all times.

Risk factors for venous eczema include

- Sitting down for long periods
- Being overweight
- Having blood clotting or heart problems
- Having had surgery recently

Top tips

- **Tips for managing venous eczema**
- **Keep your skin moisturised with gentle emollients**
- **Try compression stockings to help keep circulation going**
- **Ask healthcare providers for exercises you can do even if you're not very mobile**
- **Elevate your feet when sitting down**



What is Perioral Dermatitis?

Perioral dermatitis is characterised by a bumpy rash around the nose and mouth, although it can spread up to the face as far as the eyes and forehead, where it's known as periorificial or periocular dermatitis.

The rash can be spotty, a bit like acne, and can be scaly and inflamed-looking. On dark skin, it can be misdiagnosed as the inflammation may not be as obvious, and the rash can appear as hyper-pigmented spots. In paler skin, the rash is more likely to look red and hot. Sometimes perioral dermatitis can be weepy with clear fluid. It can feel itchy and sore, especially around the folds of the nostrils.

Symptoms of perioral dermatitis

- acne-like spots
- Inflamed areas on the face
- hyper-pigmented patches or spots
- itching and sore around the nose and mouth

The condition occurs most frequently in women and girls, particularly between the ages of 16-45 years, although it can affect anyone, including babies and children. It can also occur in people who've used topical steroid creams on their face, or have used steroid inhalers.

How to manage perioral dermatitis

To help manage persistent perioral dermatitis, it's best to be very careful about anything you put on your face. You can try going makeup-free, or using hypoallergenic brands, using a mild, natural soap-free cleanser instead of soap, and avoiding fragranced skincare, or toiletries that contain irritant ingredients. Fluoride has been identified as one trigger for perioral dermatitis, so it can be worth trying fluoride-free toothpastes. It's also worth talking to your doctor about switching to a different contraceptive, if that's appropriate.

Remember to feed your skin with nutrients so it can repair itself and normalise the cycle of regeneration - use skincare rich in EFAs, vitamins, antioxidants to support the robust functioning of the skin barrier function.

It's also important to establish anti-stress strategies as stress plays havoc with the skin. You may need a change of environment, to take some time off or find ways of de-stressing every day. Talk to your doctor, union, HR or employer about how you need to look after your health, and try to get a full night's sleep.

"Perioral dermatitis occurs most frequently in women and girls between the ages of 16-45 years, although it can affect anyone."

If avoiding triggers, switching to non-irritant alternatives and changing your skincare routine doesn't improve your perioral dermatitis, you can ask your doctor about other treatments. Of course these shouldn't include steroids, but there are still some options for you, including immunosuppressants such as tacrolimus or pimecrolimus creams, topical or oral antibiotics, and topical acne medications.



Top tips

- **Be careful with anything you put on your face**
- **Use only very gentle, unperfumed cosmetics or toiletries**
- **Avoid using topical steroids**
- **Ask your GP about alternative birth control if you're on a hormonal pill**



What Is Seborrheic Dermatitis?

Seborrheic dermatitis (also known as seborrhoeic eczema) is an inflammatory skin condition which occurs on parts of the body where there are sebaceous glands, whether that's the scalp, the chin, the neck or the chest. The reasons it flares up can be complicated, with one or more causes interacting to tip the body out of balance.

Factors which can make people more susceptible to seborrheic dermatitis include an inherited predisposition towards inflammatory conditions; life circumstances (such as stress, a poor diet, mental illness, or bad health) and environmental triggers (i.e. skin irritants, hot or dry weather, some medications). Seborrheic dermatitis is also associated with an overgrowth of a common yeast (Malassezia) on the skin, which can trigger an inflammatory response.

"The aim in managing seborrheic dermatitis is to reduce inflammation and to keep flare-ups under control as much as possible, by improving your overall health and avoiding triggers!"

The aim in managing seborrheic dermatitis is to reduce inflammation and to keep flare-ups under control as much as possible. This usually involves a holistic strategy of improving your overall health by making sure you're getting enough nutrients, sleep, exercise and rest, as well as identifying and avoiding your triggers, whether they're dietary, skin irritants in toiletries such as perfumes or detergents, or environmental.

You may want to change your shampoo and shower gel to a natural, scent-free alternative and shampoo less frequently. It's also worth trying an overnight natural oil treatment: this will feed the skin with nutritious and anti-microbial oils, and give it a chance to repair itself.

Key points for looking after skin prone to seborrheic dermatitis

- Get enough rest
- Feed your body nutritious food
- Minimise stress as much as possible
- Beat the yeast by keeping skin clean and microbe free
- Avoid ingredients which irritate your skin

Top tips

- **Use natural oils to soften flakes and nourish depleted skin**
- **Apply treatments overnight for extra conditioning care**
- **Pick oils which supply your skin with nutrients like essential fatty acids**



What Is Ichthyosis?

Ichthyosis is a group of skin conditions that results in dry, scaly or thick skin. It’s called ‘ichthyosis’ from the Greek word for fish, because the skin can look scaly.

The skin of people with ichthyosis doesn’t maintain itself as usual, and instead makes too many new skin cells and/or sheds the old ones too slowly, leading to the skin becoming thickened, dry, rough and scaly.

The most common form of ichthyosis (Ichthyosis Vulgaris) affects about 1 in 250 people. Even if skin appears normal at birth, it can become rough and dry during the first year. Symptoms are often worse - and more noticeable - in winter when it’s cold and dry, and get better in the summer with warmer, more humid weather.

Without a robust, healthy and effective skin barrier, the skin of people with ichthyosis loses moisture and is open to infection, damage and invaders such as allergens.

This leads to problems such as:

- skin infection
- severely dry/dehydrated skin
- blocked sweat glands, which can lead to overheating
- slow hair growth or hair loss if the scalp is affected
- weariness and weight-loss, as the skin burns more calories in its cycle of skin cell regeneration
- pain in moving or limited movement if the skin is very tight/cracked
- problems with eyesight or hearing if skin builds up around eyes and ears

Ichthyosis can cause mental health and emotional problems too, as it can be a visible and distressing condition, which affects self-confidence and mood.

Although the condition can't be cured, mild cases can generally be managed with a careful skincare routine. Check with your doctor if you need more intensive treatment, but because ichthyosis is a condition characterised by dry skin, people living with ichthyosis are encouraged to use rich emollients to soften any scaliness and keep skin supple, protected and well-hydrated.

Key symptoms of ichthyosis

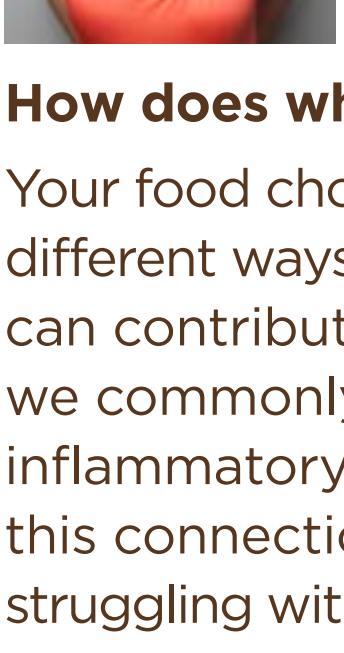
- scales
- dryness
- limited movement in area where skin has thickened
- vulnerability to infection or allergens

Tips for managing ichthyosis

- **Ichthyosis is often worse in the winter when it's cold and dry, and better in summer**
- **Skin with ichthyosis needs gentle but rich emollients**
- **Apply oils or balms to soften scaliness and protect impaired skin barrier**



3. Nutrition & Your Skin



By **Jennifer Fugo** MS, CNS, LDN, Clinical Nutritionist and podcast host of The Healthy Skin Show

How does what you eat affect your skin?

Your food choices can absolutely impact your skin in different ways depending on several factors. Diet in general can contribute to inflammation within the body (which we commonly see in those with heart disease and other inflammatory conditions). But when it comes to the skin, this connection is less commonly known by patients struggling with chronic skin concerns, even though the drugs now out on the market target inflammatory pathways.

"Diet in general can contribute to inflammation within the body, but when it comes to the skin, this connection is less commonly known."

So if you've previously been told that it doesn't matter what you eat, that's not a fair assessment. Processed, fried, sugary foods can undoubtedly drive up inflammation in your body, as well as negatively interact with your gut microbiome - another factor that can trigger inflammation.

A processed food diet rich in hydrogenated oils/fats, processed sugars, refined flours and artificial colors can contribute to blood sugar spikes, increased advanced glycation end-products (AGEs), and feed the more opportunistic organisms that live in your gut microbiome. And this type of diet often crowds out sufficient and healthy sources of protein and fiber necessary for healthy skin.

Plus, these foods are often empty calories devoid of crucial nutrients that your body needs to thrive. As a good rule of thumb, you generally don't make nutrients in your body – you need to consume them through your diet, and also ensure proper digestion and absorption in the GI tract.

How do food allergies or sensitivities manifest in the skin?

Depending on the skin condition, reactions to food can cause a wide range of reactions.

IgE-mediated allergies may cause an increase in itchiness, redness, swelling, hives, and even anaphylaxis. It's important to get any foods you suspect could be an allergy checked by your doctor or allergist, since severe reactions can be life-threatening.

Whereas certain foods associated with specific pollen allergies can trigger a cross-reaction known as Oral Allergy Syndrome. This common reaction is usually

described as a weird mouth reaction where your mouth, gums and tongue become itchy, and perhaps you experience some slight swelling in the lips or tongue. Sometimes you would feel itchier, but generally, this is not a life-threatening issue. An example of this would be someone who has a ragweed allergy who might notice that they become itchier after consuming stevia, milk thistle, or dandelion root in a supplement.

A food intolerance is a reaction to a particular part of a food that your body may not make a sufficient amount of an enzyme to break it down. The most well-known example is lactose intolerance when the body isn't producing sufficient amounts of lactase, and subsequent exposure to milk causes GI distress (ie. gas, bloating, diarrhoea).

"A food intolerance is a reaction to a particular part of a food that your body may not make a sufficient amount of an enzyme to break it down."

One type of intolerance that can impact skin issues is histamine intolerance, however this is often the result of a number of underlying issues that go far beyond consuming foods high in histamine. Histamine intolerance can increase redness, itchiness, hives, swelling, and other histamine-related symptoms.

Lastly, a food sensitivity is typically triggered when foods are broken down insufficiently in the GI tract and subsequently gain access to your body triggering your immune system. I often find that this happens because there are hidden gut functions and gut microbiome imbalances that play a role in this. These reactions can cause rashes to flare, becoming more inflamed, itchy, oozy, and reactive.

How do you identify dietary triggers that might be causing skin issues?

Keeping a food log may help connect symptoms with certain foods. If you suspect a particular food, food protein, or even certain types of sugars or fibers could be an issue (like eggs), try removing it for a week or two before reintroducing it.

That said, a trigger can also be a clue of other underlying imbalances as I'll share momentarily. Before embarking on a highly restrictive diet on your own, I'd suggest talking to a nutritionist if possible about the foods you feel might be problematic for you. For example, reactivity to high FODMAP (fermentable fiber-rich) foods can be a sign of small intestine bacterial overgrowth, and poor tolerance to animal protein in the diet can be a sign of low stomach acid (and even potentially a Helicobacter pylori infection in the stomach).

Do food sensitivities last forever?

Generally, food sensitivities will not last forever if you address the underlying reasons you developed them in the first place. If you feel like you're reactive to more and more foods, or that your skin seems to get worse the more foods you eliminate, this is a sign that your gut may need some attention.

I have often found that clients who do the work to rebalance gut function, nutrient absorption, and the microbiome tend to be able to reintroduce foods in the future without reaction.

With that said, I do understand that it's natural to think that you just have to eliminate these trigger foods for life, but I would caution readers to be careful here. The idea that elimination diets are the long-term solution to food sensitivities and chronic skin issues like eczema and psoriasis is flawed and short-sighted (as I'll discuss more in a moment).

What foods would you recommend to support healthy skin?

I generally recommend an anti-inflammatory focused diet with tweaks for personal allergies and food triggers that's based on a Mediterranean diet template.

After working with hundreds of chronic skin condition clients, I don't believe that there's one diet that works for everyone which is why it's important to avoid the dogma out there that food (or your diet) is the ultimate fix for skin issues.

"I don't believe that there's one diet that works for everyone."

It can certainly help to make proactive changes that increase nutrient density and reflect the nutritional needs appropriate for your body, but there is a slippery slope that exists when you begin to see food as your enemy and believe that the more you eliminate and restrict, the more it will heal your skin. There are dangers to cutting too much food from your diet due to the mental/emotional toll it can take (causing food fear), potentially triggering food allergies, causing nutritional deficiencies, and possibly reducing the diversity of your gut microbiome.

In my clinical experience, a diverse diet is important and should also include ample amounts of protein (at least 70-80g/day for adults) along with healthy sources of fiber with every meal.

Should people with atopic, sensitive or reactive skin take supplements?

It really depends on the situation and the symptoms that someone is experiencing full body (not just their skin).

Generally speaking, certain supplements may be helpful especially if there are known nutritional deficiencies, or you eat a diet that is known to be low in certain nutrients.

A plant-based/vegan is commonly low in zinc, vitamin B12, vitamin A, vitamin D, and iron. Whereas the carnivore diet, which has grown in popularity, is typically devoid of fiber and may result in certain deficiencies if liver is not regularly consumed (folate is a common deficiency if you don't eat liver and don't supplement with the nutrient).

Where can people look for resources and support around diet and skin?

Some diet books exist for various skin conditions that might be helpful as long as you keep my warning in mind about excessive eliminations. I'd say that the Healthy Skin Show podcast is an excellent resource for looking for more information on various chronic skin issues such as eczema, psoriasis, rosacea, hives, dandruff, acne and even Topical Steroid Withdrawal (TSW).

There's a wealth of information available on the show covering both diet and non-diet root causes approaches. The Healthy Skin Show podcast is available on Youtube, all podcast apps and at **www.HealthySkinShow.com** (with a complete transcript of each episode). I also share information on my Instagram account, **@jenniferfugo**.

What other strategies do you recommend for maintaining healthy skin?

Maintaining healthy skin involves stress management, proper nutrition, exercise, healthy gut function (which also means having one to three healthy formed bowel movements daily), and potentially a minimal number of supplements that may be tailored to you.

“Maintaining healthy skin involves stress management, proper nutrition, exercise, healthy gut function, and potentially a minimal number of supplements tailored to you!”

Proper hydration is also crucial – 80 to 100oz of water per day – potentially adding in electrolytes if that’s appropriate for you!

On the topical front, I think it’s worth remembering that finding the appropriate skin care regimen for you is important, and to avoid over-showering and over-soaping which can disturb the pH of the skin. A good rule of thumb is that typically less is more when it comes to how many products you use to the ingredient decks in your products!

*Please note, everyone is different and we’d recommend speaking with your doctor, derm nurse or nutrition professional before removing foods, or starting any supplements to make sure that it’s appropriate for them.



4. Managing Eczema in Babies and Children



By **Zoe T. Williams**, author of blog, My Allergy Kitchen and The Busy Parent's Guide to Food Allergies

It's hard work to manage and keep on top of flare ups, and can take applications of creams and ointments multiple times a day. With a wriggly toddler you may feel like you're wrestling a greasy octopus, and with older children, applying emollients can become a source of conflict. Eczema is often incredibly itchy, and scratching can be one of the most difficult symptoms to manage in young children struggling with chronic skin concerns, even though the drugs now out on the market target inflammatory pathways.

"My number one tip for managing childhood eczema is to figure out what your child's triggers are, and avoid them!"

Identify and avoid triggers

My number one tip for managing childhood eczema is to figure out what your child's triggers are, and avoid them! This will reduce the number of flare ups and make your child's eczema much easier to keep on top of. There are many triggers for eczema, but common ones include:

Soaps and bubble bath

Laundry detergent and cleaning products

Airborne allergens such as pollen, pet hair or dust mites

Hot weather (due to heat, sweat and sunscreen)

Cold weather (due to dry air from central heating)

Diet changes

Baby Eczema and Diet

Food sensitivities can sometimes be a trigger for eczema, and some families do notice that certain foods can cause a flare up. If you suspect this could be the case, keep a food and symptoms diary, and speak to a health professional before you cut any foods out of your child's diet.

"There is no universally agreed diet that 'cures' eczema."

There is no universally agreed diet that ‘cures’ eczema. However, some families notice that limiting certain foods can help improve symptoms.

In my own family, we have noticed that reducing (but not completely eliminating) wheat, dairy, sugar and meat, and instead eating lots more fruits and vegetables, has massively helped my daughter’s skin. We did this under the guidance of an alternative health professional.

Clothing and bedding

Some fabrics can irritate eczema-prone skin. Wool can feel itchy, whereas synthetic fabrics can trap heat. Cotton or bamboo clothing and bedding is soft and breathable and is much better for sensitive little ones.

This is particularly important for night time when children can get hot and sweaty under the covers. Look for organic cotton for fewer industrial irritants.

Sunscreen

Summer can be a tricky time for those with eczema. We know that heat, sweat and sunscreen are common triggers. High SPF sunscreens can actually make eczema worse as they convert the sun’s radiation into heat.

So if you do need a high SPF, try to use a mineral sunscreen, as this doesn’t have the same effect. We tend to use a medium SPF, cover up with clothing and a hat, and stay out of the sun as much as possible.

“Even with the best management in the world and removing triggers as much as possible, flare ups can still happen from time to time.”

Dealing with Flare Ups

Even with the best management in the world and removing triggers as much as possible, flare ups can still happen from time to time. So here are a couple of less well-known techniques we use to help ditch the itch.

Wet Wrapping

This can be a helpful technique to cool down very hot, inflamed eczema. It involves putting a thick layer of moisturiser on the skin, covering it with wet bandages, followed by a second layer of dry bandages over the top.

This can be left on for an hour or two, or overnight. We often use it in the summer, as the wet bandages help to cool the skin down. It also covers up the eczema which helps to reduce the damage done by scratching. You can use wet wrapping with all ages, including babies, and Balmonds Skin Salvation works very well as an emollient under wet or dry wraps.

EFT/Tapping

We recently learned a new technique to help cope with itching, called the Emotional Freedom Technique, also known as 'tapping'. This apparently works by tapping on acupressure points in the body to calm the itch. Whether this is true or not, it is a great distraction and can help to calm down an itchy child.

Often the more upset they are, the more they scratch and the more upset they become – which can become a vicious cycle. We learned how to do it from this great YouTube video "No More Itching With EFT!"

"While there is no cure for eczema, there is a lot you can do to improve your child's symptoms significantly."

While there is no cure for eczema, there is a lot you can do to improve your child's symptoms significantly. This can make them feel more comfortable and help reduce reliance on emollients and steroids.



5. Allergies and your Skin



By **Ruth Holroyd**,
award-winning writer
and campaigner,
founder of What Allergy?

What's the relationship between allergies and the condition of your skin?

There are different kinds of allergies that can affect skin health, including food allergens, airborne allergens and contact allergens.

Food Allergens

Food allergens can have a direct impact on the skin, causing hives, inflammation and irritation and can also cause eczema, especially in infants. It can also present with a delayed reaction, making it very hard to work out what foods you might be reacting to. Food allergens can be diagnosed with a skin prick test and/or blood test but food intolerances are far harder to discover. Tests for food intolerances are not scientifically proven – the only real way to work things out is to seek advice from a nutritionist or dietician and keep a food, mood and symptoms diary. It could take a few days for the food to cause a reaction so you'd be looking for patterns emerging e.g. you might always flare after a night out and alcohol might be the culprit!

Airborne Allergens

Often overlooked when thinking about the skin because they usually cause respiratory issues. However when pollen and other allergens come into contact with the skin they can cause irritation. The whole body can become inflamed, airways, gut and skin so trying to eradicate known allergens is key e.g. mould, perfumes, chemicals, animal dander etc. from your home and garden if you can.

Contact Allergens

These are rare but can be diagnosed using patch testing, where tiny quantities are stuck to the skin using plasters that are left for a few days to see what reaction takes place. Certain contact substances can cause a great deal of irritation but still not be an allergy. Think about all the skin care, cosmetics, shampoos, hair care and cleaning products that you might be applying or using. Everything adds up and all the products you buy should be vetted and analysed to make sure they're kind to the skin and good for the body.

"If the skin barrier is compromised it can become irritated by many things that might not necessarily indicate an allergy."

Bear in mind too that if the skin barrier is compromised it can become irritated by many things that might not necessarily indicate an allergy. Things like peeling potatoes can feel like acid on sore skin but not bother you at all when your skin barrier is strong. Sensitive skin can be very hard to control and heal, especially in winter so it's important to work on healing, nourishing and protecting that skin barrier.

How do allergies or sensitivities affect the skin?

There are so many ways that irritants and allergies can affect sensitive skin including:

- **Hives and itchy rashes**, a bit like nettle rash
- **Pompholyx** (also called dyshidrotic eczema) shows up as itchy little white blisters on the palms of the hands. They can be incredibly irritating and when itched, extremely painful if you break the skin. They can be a sign of an allergy and are best left unpicked – though it's very difficult to leave them alone.
- **Broken skin, cracked and sore** – Undiagnosed food allergies or intolerances can show up on the skin, as can contact allergens such as latex, nickel or anything coming into contact with hands for example.
- **Infections** – Damaged skin can be at risk of infection, especially when you're run down. This can show up as boils, swollen and burning, oozing skin that would need treatment.
- **Eczema herpeticum** – Caused by the herpex zoster virus that remains dormant in the body but can recur once you've caught either Chicken pox or the virus from someone else. It's very contagious so care should be taken not to spread this virus.

- **Staph aureus –** A common bacteria on the skin of atopic people, who commonly have larger numbers living in their skin microbiome than people with healthy skin. There are natural ways of keeping this bacteria in check, including tea tree oil and apple cider vinegar, to name a few.

"Our skin is our largest organ and can come under attack from all corners!"

Our skin is our largest organ and can come under attack from all corners it sometimes seems. It's important to also remember that eczema can wax and wane and flare up for no apparent reason. Everyone with eczema should familiarise themselves with these different types of skin rash as some will need specialist medication to heal.

How do you identify your own triggers?

It's a really tricky question, because sometimes it's just bad and you can't identify any triggers. Some people know that food affects them whilst others see no obvious indications that they react to food and can eat what they want.

I really believe that what we do in our lifestyles does play out on our skin. From our mental health to our gut microbiome, and everything we do in between, all plays a part. Think of it like a million tiny things that could be having an impact. It might not seem like lowering your alcohol intake makes a difference, but even if it's a 1% improvement, it's an improvement. And if you look at your life from your skin care regime, cleaning products, work life balance, exercise, healthy habits, food diversity, nutrition, even how you think about yourself and your skin, you play a part in healing.

"I really believe that what we do in our lifestyles does play out on our skin: from our mental health to our gut microbiome, and everything we do in between, all plays a part."

You might not like to hear this advice, but you really do owe it to yourself to make small changes for the better. You don't have to avoid all alcohol, and only eat a perfect diet – you can absolutely enjoy the things you love, but if they're ultimately not healthy long term, try to see them as treats to indulge in and focus on healing that skin, gut and mind.

For more detailed advice on skin flare triggers read my article on Balmonds info hub.

Do allergies last forever?

Yes and no... People can grow out of allergies and things can also cycle around, so you might have a few good years with hardly any hay fever and then have a terrible year another time. People who go through Topical Steroid Withdrawal report being highly allergic to many things during TSW, but they do heal and find they can resume normal life once TSW is over.

However, if you have an anaphylactic reaction and a true diagnosed allergy you're unlikely to outgrow it if you are still allergic at ten years old. Younger children can and do outgrow some allergies, so make sure you get your kids retested and try to reintroduce foods safely if you can.

What strategies would you recommend to support healthy skin around allergies?

Avoidance and protection are key! If you have a diagnosed allergy, be vigilant to possible exposure, plan ahead and find ways to cover and protect your skin, because it's not always possible to stay completely safe. E.g. cover skin and take a parasol during high pollen

counts as allergens can affect your skin if they land on you. Wear gloves for food preparation, cleaning and any outdoor chores and clean your skin and moisturise before it gets too inflamed and damaged.

Try to accept the way things are too, don't rage and fight and feel it's unjust. You don't have to like it, and of course we'd all love to wave a wand and heal our skin forever, but it's OK to have a skin condition. Accepting it can make it easier to live with the pain.

"Try to accept the way things are too, don't rage and fight and feel it's unjust. You don't have to like it, but it's ok to have a skin condition."

Feeling like you have to stop scratching all the time can be so hard, we all know that the skin will heal better if we don't scratch but the need can be so great that it's impossible to ignore. There are ways to try to minimise damage though, from wearing cotton gloves to bandaging the skin overnight. Ice is also wonderful for stopping itching in its tracks. If you need to scratch, just do it, and don't beat yourself up over it. You are amazing at coping with what you do, most people would not know what to do if they suddenly woke up with eczema.

Should people with allergies take supplements?

This is such a good question and there is much debate. There is no should or shouldn't here, it's all preference, but it could be a good idea to get your vitamin and mineral levels checked by your doctor. If you are deficient in anything it could have a big impact on your skin. There are many vitamins and minerals that are essential for healthy skin, including calcium, selenium, vitamin D, zinc, magnesium, vitamin E, etc. as well as omega 6, the list endless and you'd be popping so many pills each day to reach the recommended daily intake. However many experts say that most of these pills go straight through us without the body being able to make use of the goodness in the tablets.

Not all supplements are equal either, make sure you get a good quality brand and not just the cheapest you can find. Research the quality and go for simple products that are allergen free. Supplements that are in the form of a tincture or more plant based and natural will work much better. They are easier for the body to recognise, utilise and process. For example you can get liquid magnesium, vitamin C powder and also tinctures that support different organs in your body. If you can find a naturopath or specialist who can advise you which might help, reach out. Otherwise people find themselves blindly popping pills, spending a lot of money on supplements and not really knowing whether they are helping or not.

Some people are able to heal and don't take any supplements at all. Like all things, it's a balance! Vitamin D has been proven to help so it might be worth boosting that during winter months.



6. Building A Skincare Regime With Sensitive Skin



by **Dr Sina Ghadiri**,
Dermatology Registrar,
Founder of Topiskin

How does having a skin condition affect what you put on your skin?

In general terms, having a skin condition should narrow down the types of products you would use (or not use) specific to what you are treating. For example, many skin conditions are linked to skin barrier dysfunction (such as eczema and psoriasis) necessitating use of thicker emollients and products targeting skin barrier repair. In this way it is as much a case of what to avoid, for example avoiding frequent exfoliators/over cleansing if you have sensitive or irritated skin as it is choosing the right products for your skin concern.

"Many skin conditions are linked to skin barrier dysfunction necessitating use of thicker emollients and products targeting skin barrier repair."

Are there any common ingredients which are important to avoid if you have sensitive skin?

The frequent errors to avoid (and which are easy to fall into) with sensitive skin include over-use of acids (AHAs or BHAs), choosing too high a strength of topical retinoid or using them too frequently. Products laden with fragrances (which can either be labelled generally as parfum/perfume, or reveal individual ingredients such as linalool or limonene) can precipitate an allergic contact dermatitis in a subset of people, and would be wisely avoided with sensitive skin.

How do you identify what's causing your skin to react?

This can in some instances be very difficult. A good idea is to stop all products apart from a barrier emollient, and wash your face simply with water. Gradually reintroduce your products one at a time (I would suggest at one week intervals) in order to help you identify the particular product to exclude in the future.

"A good idea is to stop all products apart from a barrier emollient, and wash your face simply with water."

Do skin conditions last forever?

Generally if a condition has a reversible cause – for example a patient has been able to identify and exclude a contact allergen or they have identified and stopped a practice of theirs irritating their skin, there is a good likelihood to avoid future problems. Conditions frequently encountered in dermatology, such as eczema and psoriasis exist on a spectrum of severity, and their re-occurrences can be unpredictable in nature. Some patients would need only minimal topical treatment to remain completely free of skin disease in the long term, whereas others would need strong immunosuppressive medication through their dermatologist.

What's the main cause of dry or sensitive skin?

Firstly it's important to state that sensitive or dry skin can be a very subjective condition dependent on the individual's perceptions of their own skin. Sometimes they state they have very sensitive skin without there being any objective signs present. That being said, there are probably factors which are both innate (the integrity of the individual's skin barrier and genetic predispositions) and external (ranging from atmosphere, pollution to the person's individual practices). As such seeking improvement would need a multifactorial approach considering all of these potential causes.

What ingredients would you recommend to support healthy skin?

Whilst the skincare concerns of people are different and varied, some ingredients help to support healthy skin revolving particularly around maintaining the integrity of the skin barrier. Regular use of a moisturiser, especially those which include ceramides, is one of the most important steps, going thicker or thinner depending on the person's particular skin type. Natural products such as shea butter are popular for good reason and are frequently used as standalone or as part of other products, and provide nourishing fatty acids to the skin.

"Natural products such as shea butter are popular for good reason, and provide nourishing fatty acids to the skin."

Should people with atopic, sensitive or reactive skin use soap?

Frequently in dermatology, in patients with atopic, reactive or sensitive skin we advise the use of fragrance-free soap substitutes – which provides both antimicrobial and moisturising benefits. This is because ordinary soaps are often not formulated for irritated, sensitive or eczema-prone skin and may further compromise the skin barrier. Furthermore they are also frequently packed with fragrances which may precipitate an allergic contact dermatitis in a small subset of people.

Where can people look for resources and support around cosmetics/toiletries and sensitive skin?

For further information regarding particular skin conditions, patient.info provides a useful first step to understanding more about the condition and general management principles to initially consider. Of course, this should not replace attending a GP or dermatologist for problematic conditions.

For people who want to go into more depth and understand more of the science behind their cosmetics, the website INCIDECODER offers very useful breakdowns of products, explaining exactly what particular ingredients do.

What other strategies do you recommend for maintaining healthy skin?

General principles I would stick to include the following:

1) Resist the temptation to over-cleanse – this has become a particular trend lately, and going beyond twice a day can make your skin more prone to barrier dysfunction.

2) Be sensitive to how the environment impacts your skin, and how you may need to adapt your skincare depending on season, for example choosing a heavier, more nourishing moisturiser in the winter months, and particularly emphasising regular sunscreen application in the summer months.

3) Don't just add in more products to your routine without a thoughtful strategy, frequently I see patients mixing and matching with multiple products which have similar ingredient profiles – eventually leading to irritation and sensitivity



Dr Sina's recommendation:
"Skin Salvation product has had an incredible reception with great reviews, no doubt this is due to its emphasis on natural ingredients (particularly the beeswax!) without filler ingredients or fragrances. It is one of the most versatile products within the range for good reason."



7. Going Clean: ingredients to avoid if you have sensitive skin

Are you fed up with struggling to find toiletries and skincare that actually do what they're meant to without causing infernal itchiness or making your face blotchy and red?

Do you pick up a new moisturiser or shampoo on a shopping trip and have to cross your fingers, toes, everything, that this one won't cause your eyes to itch or your skin to break out in spots? And how can something that says 'natural' on the bottle end up making your skin so sore?!

You’re not alone!

1 in 5 children and 1 in 10 adults experience some form of skin irritation, so there’s a really strong incentive for big cosmetic brands to avoid known irritants.

But unfortunately, while the clean beauty market is growing year on year, much conventional skincare - even products that claim to be ‘mild’ or ‘natural’ - include synthetic ingredients that can flare up sensitive skin, drying it out and causing damage to the skin barrier that plays a vital part in keeping irritants out and moisture in.

“It’s absolutely standard for moisturisers to include irritating ingredients such as synthetic fragrances or sulphates without warnings for those with sensitive skin.’

What’s in your moisturiser?

It’s absolutely standard for moisturisers to include potentially irritating ingredients such as synthetic fragrances or sulphates without including warnings for those with sensitive skin. It means that choosing yourself new products can be more of a high risk strategy than a self-care treat, even if you’re prepared to pore over lengthy ingredients lists in the hope of recognising some of the culprits.

We’ve made a list below of some of the common ingredients that can irritate skin and which those with sensitive, dry or inflamed skin might be wise to avoid completely.

Even natural can be an issue

Even natural ingredients such as essential oils, coconut, soya, or lanolin have the potential to cause a reaction on sensitive skin. We’re all individuals and what our skin can tolerate varies hugely, so be careful with any product you’re putting on your skin for the first time in case you’re sensitive to even the most natural, biodegradable or organic ingredients.

"We're all individuals and what our skin can tolerate varies hugely, so be careful with any product you're putting on your skin for the first time."

Patch testing

Never skip the patch test! Apply a small amount of a new product to the inner wrist or behind the ear, and leave it on for at least 24 (preferably 48) hours. Check for any signs of irritation, changes in texture or sensitivity. It's worth remembering that your skin varies in thickness and sensitivity on different parts of your body - eyelids are more sensitive than the soles of your feet! What might be fine for your hands might flare up your face. And it's also the case that your skin's resilience varies from month to month; if you're in mid-flare, applying a perfumed cream could set off an explosive chain reaction of inflammation and itchiness, but could be absolutely fine when you're eczema-free.

"Fragrance is the biggest cause of cosmetic contact dermatitis."

Problematic ingredients

Fragrance Whether listed as perfume, fragrance or parfum, substances added to make a cream smell nice are very often irritating to sensitive skin because of the alcohol and volatile oils they contain; in fact fragrance (natural or synthetic) is the biggest cause of cosmetic contact dermatitis.

Parabens Commonly listed as things like butylparaben, methylparaben or propylparaben etc., parabens are synthetic preservatives that have been associated with skin irritation, dermatitis and dryness.

Sulfates Sodium lauryl sulfate (aka SLS) is a foamer that is mostly used in shampoos and body washes to make the lovely bubbly texture we know means 'clean'. Detergents are there to bind to dirt and allow it to be washed off, but they can also bind to the skin's natural oils, vital to a functioning skin barrier, and wash them away too! Sulfates are known to cause skin damage and irritation so they're best avoided by those with sensitive skin, even if used in a wash-off product such as shampoo, but especially when used in a topical emollient (like aqueous cream) that is designed to be left on the skin.

Methylisothiazolinone / Methylchloroisothiazolinone Preservatives found in cosmetics linked to neuro toxicity and allergic reactions, including eczema flare-ups.

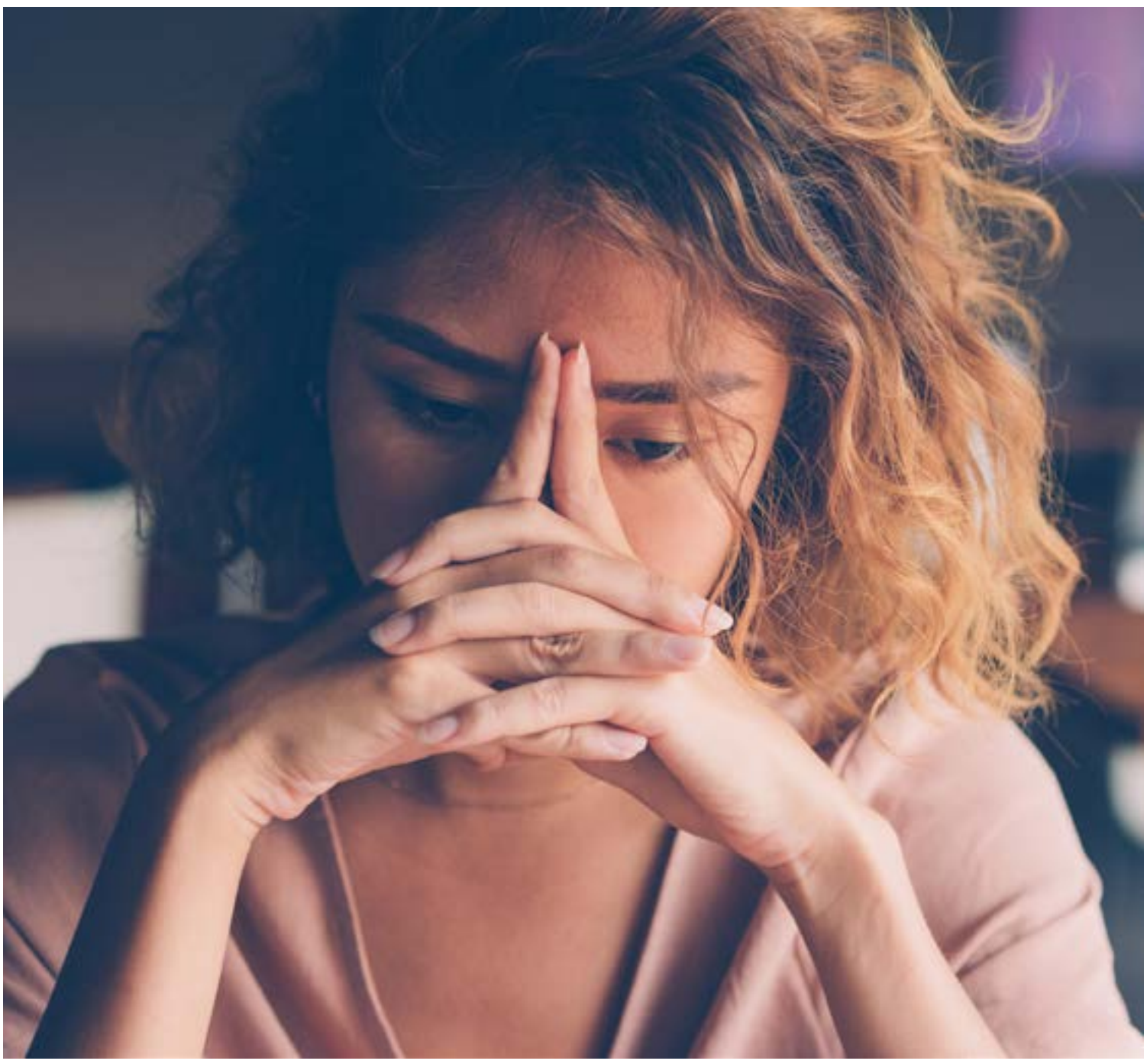
Phenoxyethanol A preservative known to have caused severe allergic reactions and triggered eczema flares.

Phthalates Now banned in the EU but still commonly used in products in the US, phthalates are linked to endocrine disruption, developmental and reproductive toxicity, and cancer.

PEGs PEG is the abbreviation of polyethylene glycol, and refers to a mixture of compounds that are used as emulsifiers and for their skin-penetrating properties; they're best avoided on broken or eczema-prone skin because they can cause skin damage, irritation and sensitivity.

Glycolic acid, salicylic acid, and retinol These substances tend to dry out or irritate skin which can make eczema patches worse or cause a new flare-up.

Don't forget that everyone is different, and what can cause one person to flare can be tolerated perfectly well by another. It's worth checking with online directories, such as sensitive skin experts SkinSAFE, so you can put together an individualised list of ingredients to avoid.



8. Stress & Skin: Wellness Strategies For Healthier Skin

Stress is the most underrated factor in skin health, and can trigger or exacerbate flares of eczema, psoriasis, rosacea etc. There are ways and means to dial down the stress levels, but let's start with understanding what's actually going on.

Understanding stress hormones

When we feel stressed, frightened or threatened our bodies release stress hormones. This is usually a helpful process, triggered by a fight or flight response, a mechanism which lets us mobilise a lot of energy rapidly when we're faced with a threat to our survival.

When we feel threatened, cortisol is released into the bloodstream and triggers various processes which allow the body to deal with the immediate threat. Once the threat is over, cortisol levels drop, and the body gradually returns to its usual state.

What happens long-term?

The problem is that our bodies are only designed to cope with short bursts of cortisol into the bloodstream; problems can occur when people are stressed for prolonged periods of time and continually releasing cortisol.

"Many people have high levels of inflammatory stress hormones in their bodies much of the time."

With money worries, family and relationship issues, work stresses, school anxiety and so many other things to fret over on a daily basis, many people have high levels of inflammatory stress hormones in their bodies much of the time. This is when cortisol becomes an enemy rather than a friend!

Collagen

One effect of prolonged cortisol release is that collagen formation can be inhibited. Collagen is a fibrous protein that provides strength, waterproofing and elasticity to the skin; it's what makes the skin barrier robust and healthy.

Think of the skin as a wall or a waterproof mac: it stops irritants getting in and prevents water from getting out! Without regular production of collagen to fortify its defences, skin struggles to retain the moisture vital to maintaining healthy, supple skin.

"Think of the skin as a wall or a waterproof mac: it stops irritants getting in and prevents water from getting out!"

The inflammatory issue

Prolonged cortisol levels can also interfere with the body's ability to regulate inflammatory responses. This can be a real problem for people living with inflammatory skin conditions, as over-reaction is at the heart of the problem.

People with chronic skin conditions can react with excessive inflammation to all sorts of triggers, whether dietary, environmental or internal, causing heat, redness, itching and swelling.

Couple this overreaction with faulty collagen production and problems with retaining moisture, and you can see how prolonged periods of stress can really test our skin's ability to stay healthy and robust.

"Prolonged periods of stress can really test our skin's ability to stay healthy and robust."

Stress-busting strategies

Sometimes it's easy to identify what's causing stress in your life, and it can be resolved relatively easily, but for many people stress becomes a regular fixture. In that case some stress-busting management strategies can help lower cortisol levels and leave us better able to manage our overall health.

Physical Activity

Aerobic activity can really help to disperse high levels of cortisol. It doesn't have to be full-scale gymnastics three times a week: even just a walk, bike ride, taking the stairs

instead of the lift, a stroll to the shop instead of driving or a dance around the kitchen to your favourite tune can help. A yoga class, swimming, Zumba, jogging or any aerobic activity a few times a week can work wonders for reducing stress levels.

Meditation

Meditation, at its simplest, is making time to quiet your mind and feel calm for a bit. Even just a few deep breaths, a few minutes a day, will engage the vagus nerve, which sends a signal to the nervous system to slow heart rate and decrease cortisol.

Social Interaction

That's a technical term for hanging out with people you like! Studies show that spending time with friends can reduce cortisol levels; spending time with people who make you feel good, including physical affectionate touch, increases oxytocin (the happy hormone) and reduces cortisol (the stress hormone). The more hugs, chatting and laughing the better.

Music

Listening to music you love has also been shown to reduce cortisol levels. Playing music or singing is even better for stress-busting happy hormones!

Sleep

Getting enough good quality sleep can be a game-changer for skin issues, especially those which are worse at night. The body needs time to rest, reset and repair, but getting into bed can make you hot and uncomfortable and trigger an itching episode. Try having a fan beside the bed and use soft, cool, thin layers of night clothes and bedding - it can be worth investing in specialised bedding. Make sure your environment is cool but not too dry, so add moisture into the air with a humidifier, and moisturise with an effective emollient before going to bed.



9. Making your Home Skin Condition-Friendly!

For many people living with eczema or other chronic skin conditions, allergies go hand in hand with their condition and exacerbate a flare-up, so that even the place we call home can be a minefield of irritants that can trigger flare-ups, rashes and itchy skin.

So how can you change your environment if you have eczema or allergies?

Some of the most common allergens in the home are house dust mites, mould and cleaning materials that contain chemical irritants. We'll look at each in turn and suggest ways in which you can minimise their effects.

"Not everyone with eczema is sensitive to house dust mites, but enough are that it's definitely worth looking into reducing them in your own home!"

House dust mites

Not everyone with eczema is sensitive to house dust mites, but enough are that it's definitely worth looking into reducing them in your own home! It's not actually the mites themselves, but protein in their droppings that can trigger an immune-system response in the body and lead to inflammation and itching.

House dust mites live on dust and the dead skin cells humans shed; they love carpets, bedding and soft furnishings like sofas, mattresses, and curtains, so one way to lessen their presence is to have wipe-clean window blinds and wood/vinyl flooring.

Carpets and beds ideally need to be vacuumed several times a week and upholstery once a week, using a vacuum cleaner with a HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) filter that collects more dust and mites in the machine.

Bedding should be washed frequently on a hot wash (at least 60 degrees) to kill mites. You can buy allergy-proof covers for your mattress, duvet and pillows, which can help a lot, but ideally your duvets and pillows should still be washed every 6 weeks and tumble dried on a hot setting.

Hard surfaces like shelves and tables should be dusted with a damp cloth as often as possible.

You can cut down on the amount of dusting needed by keeping books and ornaments in enclosed display cabinets/cupboards, rather than open shelves.

Soft toys can be frozen to kill dust mites, but brush them after to remove the dead mites.

Mould

Damp and mould can cause lots of health issues, but can particularly affect people with allergies and skin conditions. They are caused by excess moisture, either in a building itself or by condensation from cooking, showering/bathing, drying clothing indoors, inadequate ventilation etc.

"Damp and mould can cause lots of health issues, but can particularly affect people with allergies and skin conditions."

If you already have mould, it needs careful treatment to remove (please do a web search for the best methods of mould removal).

You can prevent the build up of condensation by regularly ventilating rooms (opening windows and doors), and by shutting the door of rooms where you're cooking, showering etc, as well as having an open window/fan on in those rooms.

Good insulation and central heating help prevent damp, although central heating can also dry skin out, which is not helpful for skin conditions. You can counteract this by placing bowls of water near radiators. Dehumidifiers are a good way to dry out damp rooms.

You can avoid build up of mould in washing machines by leaving the door open until the machine dries out after every use.

Cleaning materials

Many household cleaners contain chemicals that act as skin irritants, but there are plenty of alternatives out there now, many of which have the advantage of being better for the environment.

Unperfumed, non-biological laundry detergents work well for some people with sensitive skin, but can still be a trigger for others. Eco balls/eco eggs/soap nuts/castile soap can be an eczema/allergy-friendly alternative and

are usually good value. If using laundry detergents or fabric conditioner, try to stick to unperfumed ones and choose the double rinse cycle, if your machine has one, to remove any chemicals left in the laundry.

"'Old-fashioned' cleaning methods can often be the most skin and eco-friendly methods."

'Old-fashioned' cleaning methods, such as using distilled (white) vinegar to clean windows and washing machines, and bicarbonate of soda or castile soap to clean bathrooms and kitchens can often be the most skin and eco-friendly methods.

It's always best to wear gloves when cleaning; wearing cotton gloves underneath normal household cleaning gloves is kindest to skin (use non-latex gloves if you have a latex allergy).

Making it work for you

Some of the above may not be affordable and might be a tall order for lots of us who have busy lives with work, children etc., as well as trying to manage your chronic skin conditions, so please don't feel bad if you can't manage all (or any) of the above.

Even doing some of it whenever you feel able will be beneficial. It can be worth considering doing a work/skills swap with a friend or relative who can help you with some of these cleaning tasks in exchange for you doing something for them that is within your capabilities, so you can avoid coming into contact with substances that hurt your skin.



10. Teenage Skin

The teenage years can be mortifying enough without outbreaks of acne, rosacea or eczema to contend with, but unfortunately that's exactly what tends to happen when hormones are running riot!

Hormonal changes mean that your skin produces more sebum, the oily substance that skin produces to make itself an effective barrier against the outside world. Unfortunately, excess sebum can block pores and cause blackheads and whiteheads, and blocked pores in turn can be vulnerable to bacteria and get infected.

As the production of oil and keratin increases, pores enlarge and the skin barrier weakens, meaning that skin gets both spottier and more sensitive. So as well as keeping skin clean, you'll also need to treat your extra sensitive skin very carefully, rather than smother it in heavy foundation and highly perfumed moisturisers, or scour it with soap and abrasive skin treatments.

But whatever's going on in your teenage years, remember you're not alone! Young people are under tremendous pressure to have flawless, dewy, Instagram-perfect skin and might feel awkward and shy about their blemishes and outbreaks, but none of us are perfect, whatever social media might imply. Unrealistic representations of beauty that cover up or blur out imperfections can make already unself-confident teens feel isolated and even depressed.

"Young people are under tremendous pressure to have flawless skin, but none of us are perfect."

Five Top Tips For Getting Through Teenage Years

Hydrate

You'll still need to moisturise even if your skin has oily areas, you just need to find a moisturiser that doesn't either flare-up sensitivities or clog pores. Avoid irritants, colours, perfumes, and synthetic additives, and instead go for really pure, mild, unperfumed natural moisturisers.

Cleanse

Avoid scrubbing away at skin or using harsh soap-based cleansers or peels which can strip the oils from skin; use soap-free ph neutral washes or why not try the oil-based cleansing method instead? This is a way of gently lifting dirt and makeup without scouring the epidermis.

The right cleanser will work even for oily skin, removing excess oil and grime without upsetting your skin's natural balance, while nourishing the skin with essential fatty acids. Pick low comedogenic oils - that means avoiding coconut which can clog pores and looking for light, easily absorbed oils such as safflower, hemp, sunflower. Naturally antimicrobial tea tree oil can battle the bugs that cause infections, mites or yeast overload.

Nourish

Treat your skin to some intensive nourishment so you know it's getting all the nutrients, EFAs and vitamins it needs to support its cycle of regeneration and repair. A few drops of omega-rich oil every night can work wonders and rosehip is especially good for blemishes and caused by scratching or acne-damaged skin.

"A few drops of omega-rich oil every night can work wonders!"

Love The Skin You're In

That might mean taking care of yourself and your skin in all sorts of other ways, from drinking plenty of water and cutting out the sugar and additives, to treating yourself with kindness and getting support if you're feeling isolated or alone. Check out supportive skin-positive online communities, people who talk about their skin's ups and downs as a normal part of life, rather than following influencers who use filters or promote an unattainable version of beauty.

10. Resources

Eczema Clothing - comfortable eczema-friendly clothing for children and adults living with eczema

CosiCare - manufacturers of unique safe scratchers for itch relief

Itch&B*tch - podcast & community chatting about all things eczema

Skinterrupt - advice and support for chronic skin rash conditions

WhatAllergy - award-winning blog on allergies, eczema and topical steroid withdrawal syndrome

The Eczema Sample Store - boxes of eczema-friendly samples shipped to your door

National Eczema Society UK - information and support around eczema

Allergy UK - information and support around allergies

Scratch That UK - UK charity raising awareness of topical steroid withdrawal syndrome

ITSAN - worldwide charity (sponsored by Balmonds) raising awareness & providing support for people living with topical steroid withdrawal syndrome

Eczema & Skin of Color - The National Eczema Association's inclusive resource hub for skin of colour

National Eczema Association - American organisation providing support and information

The British Association of Dermatologists - professional membership body for dermatologists in the UK, dedicated to medical education, research, and professional practice and standards.

The British Skin Foundation - charity which supports research into skin conditions

Eczema Outreach Support – Scottish charity helping people with eczema, for example avoiding frequent exfoliators/over cleansing if you have sensitive or irritated skin as it is choosing the right products for your skin concern.

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