



What is atopic dermatitis?

- Atopic dermatitis (also known as eczema) is a common skin disease. It makes the skin dry, red, and very itchy.
- Atopic dermatitis comes in cycles, with times it gets worse (flares) and times it gets better.
- Atopic dermatitis is not contagious.

How can atopic dermatitis affect school performance?

Many children with atopic dermatitis have trouble sleeping at night because of the itch. Feeling itchy and tired during the day can sometimes make it harder to concentrate at school. Stress and anxiety often make children feel itchier.

What if I notice a student with atopic dermatitis itching and scratching while in school? What can I do to help?

Scratching makes atopic dermatitis worse, but it can be hard for children to resist scratching. Sometimes children scratch without even knowing they are doing it.

- Telling children not to scratch usually doesn't help. Children may feel frustrated or embarrassed, which often makes itching and scratching worse.
- It is much more helpful to focus on what children CAN do when they feel itchy at school. Teachers and school nurses can be important partners in helping children manage itching and scratching at school. **It helps to talk with children and their family to make plans together.**

Some strategies that can help a student with atopic dermatitis:

- A special signal between the student and teacher when the child feels itchy or the teacher notices that the child is scratching. The signal can remind the child to use strategies to manage the itch. Some children use a secret signal when they need to leave class to visit the nurse.
- Small items to keep hands busy during class time (instead of scratching), such as a stress ball, worry stone, or small fidget toy that doesn't disturb other children. Keeping hands busy is often helpful during times that hands are free, such as circle time.
- Brief visits to the school nurse to soothe the skin. This may include applying moisturizer or getting a cool pack or cool cloth to put on itchy areas. Older children may be able to keep moisturizer with them in a desk or backpack.
- Ways to cool down if hot or sweaty after physical education or recess, because sweat can make children itchier. Wiping off with a cool paper towel (and then applying moisturizer) or taking a cool drink can be helpful.
- Relaxation strategies such as deep breathing that help manage stress and calm the body. School counselors can often help with these strategies.
- Having a plan to avoid triggers that make atopic dermatitis worse. Triggers are different for each child, but could include things like soaps that irritate the skin or allergies to things such as dust mites, pollen or mold. The family, school nurse and teacher will be partners in developing this plan.

Some children with atopic dermatitis may feel embarrassed about their skin. Usually when other children know about atopic dermatitis this cuts down on questions and teasing. Simple information is often best. You may want to say, "Atopic dermatitis is itchy dry skin. It's like an allergy. You can't catch atopic dermatitis."

There are also more formal ways to provide education about atopic dermatitis, depending on what the child prefers, the child's age, and what the school can provide.

- Family member or teacher reading a children's book about atopic dermatitis
- School nurse providing education about atopic dermatitis (special presentation, part of a health lesson)
- Child teaching about atopic dermatitis (circle time, presentation)

Your support will make a big difference in helping children's skin and self-esteem!