

Information for **Teenagers** with **Eczema**

live your life



Info for teenagers with eczema

So you've got eczema. It doesn't look nice, it's itchy and sore and applying creams is a pain, but it doesn't have to rule your life.

The first thing to remember is this: nobody's perfect. Very few people have totally clear skin, even models. That's why there's an army of makeup artists, photographers and lighting people on hand at every photo-shoot. Even then, the pictures you see in magazines aren't real - they've been airbrushed to hide any blemishes, such as spots, eczema or birthmarks. So don't judge yourself by what you see in magazines or on TV - it's an illusion.

When you look in the mirror, you focus on your flaws. We all do it. All you can see is that patch of eczema on your cheek, or that zit on your chin. But often, other people don't even notice, unless you point it out. What they see is the whole package:

your features, hair, clothes and your personality, all rolled into one. If you're kind, cheerful and friendly, people will soon forget about your eczema.

Everybody has down days. If your eczema has flared up badly, or is particularly uncomfortable, you're bound to feel miserable. But it's all too easy to blame everything on your skin. Had your mobile nicked? Fallen out with your best mate? Don't let having eczema make you feel worse. Remember, you've got eczema, eczema doesn't have you!

Feeling down? Talk it out. Speaking to someone - a close friend, brother or sister - about how you feel always helps. If you'd rather talk to someone who doesn't know you, in confidence, why not call the Youth Access helpline (0208 772 9900 - 9.30am - 4.30pm Mon - Fri) - they can refer you, free, to information sources, support groups or counsellors in your local area.

Having eczema has actually made me a more confident person. Having to deal with it from a very early age has shown me I can cope with difficult problems and has definitely made me stronger.

DAVID, 17

I feel self-conscious about my body and don't like taking my shirt off at school, or wearing short-sleeves. But nobody has ever said anything nasty. A couple of people have asked questions and I've just explained what's wrong. They never mention it again. Being afraid of what other people might think is usually worse than the reality.

LISA, 14

It's amazing how many other people at school have eczema. I thought I'd be the only one, but one of my best friends has it too. Now we swap stories about creams we've tried and tips about good treatments.

RACHEL, 15



Itching to succeed

Feeling stressed? Anxious? Worried about exams?

The last thing you need is for your eczema to flare up. But it's a cruel fact that stress - particularly exam stress - does seem to make eczema worse.

To add to your problems, exams usually take place in the spring or summer, when the heat is likely to aggravate your eczema. Not to mention the extra problems caused by hay-fever.

You've got two choices. You can either refuse to acknowledge your eczema and risk flunking your exams, or you can make it easier on yourself by planning in advance.

Here's the boring bit: you've got to be sensible. Don't leave all your revision to the last minute so you're in a blind panic. Give yourself plenty of breaks and treats, like arranging to see friends, or going to the cinema, so you've got something to look forward to. Eat healthily and get lots of sleep. It pays off to be a bit more conscientious than usual with your skin care.

Don't moan when you get your results and find you've got a bad mark - tell your teachers about your eczema well before your exams so they can help you. It might be possible for them to arrange for you to have extra time to complete your exams. You may even be able to take them in a hospital ward.

If you have bad eczema on your hands, which makes writing with a pen difficult, ask if the examining board will let you use a computer or tape recorder for your answers instead.

If possible, make sure you sit exams in a cool room and always wear loose, cotton clothes. Put in an early request to sit away from any windows.

Every time I have exams my eczema flares up. I'm revising for my A levels at the moment and because I'm so stressed it's worse than ever, a real nuisance when I'm trying to concentrate. But I've worked out ways of managing it. Instead of obsessing about it, I'll get up and get a drink or go for a short walk.

DANIEL, 18

Get out there

There's nothing scarier than walking into a room full of people you don't know, whether it's at a party, social club or a new school. What will they think of you? Will they like you? Will anyone fancy you?



If you've got eczema you'll probably also be thinking: will they notice my itchy, red patches? Will they stare, make a nasty comment, or worse, avoid me completely? Worrying about what your skin looks like will make you even more nervous and self-conscious.

The thing to remember is, however confident people seem, they're all feeling just as anxious as you. Everybody wants to make a good first impression. Everybody wants to make

friends and feel accepted. And everybody's got something they're worried about, whether it's eczema, acne, asthma or just chunky thighs.

Don't hide yourself away at home or make excuses not to meet new people. The more you go out, the easier it will be. And once they start talking to you, few people will even notice your eczema. If they do ask questions, it's up to you whether you tell them about it. If someone stares it's because they're ignorant - if you want you can set them straight about eczema. Ignore anyone who makes a nasty comment - they're not worth a second thought. Who needs rude or bitchy friends?

An organisation called '**Changing Faces**' produces excellent information for people who feel self-conscious about their appearance. You can contact them on 0207 706 4232, www.changingfaces.co.uk

It's very rare to get bullied about your eczema, but if bullying is a problem there are lots of organisations that can help. Call the Kidscape helpline (0207 730 3300 between 10am-4pm weekdays) www.kidscape.org.uk and you'll be able to speak to a qualified bullying counsellor. The Anti-Bullying campaign also has a helpline (0207 378 1446 Mon-Fri 10am-4pm). If

you've got access to the internet, log-on to an excellent site called Bullying Online at www.bullying.co.uk. It's got reams of useful information for parents and children, links, problem pages, and even provides legal advice. If you send an email to help@bullying.co.uk, they'll try to help you sort out your individual problem.

I think having eczema means I've actually got nicer friends. They're all kind, considerate people, who don't care whether I've got eczema. I wouldn't want to be friends with ignorant or shallow people who are obsessed with appearance anyway.

GEMMA, 16

I do feel nervous that boys won't fancy me because of my eczema and I have been too scared to ask boys out in case they reject me. But now I've got a lovely boyfriend who says it doesn't bother him - and I believe him.

RACHEL, 15

It's a cover up

Finding cosmetic products that won't irritate your skin can be hit or miss. Some brands will suit certain people but make others' eczema flare up. In general, look for ranges which say they're hypo-allergenic and products that aren't coloured or perfumed. But be prepared for a reaction. And don't try out a new blusher or foundation just before you go out - test everything well before you use it.

Camouflage

Got an embarrassing patch of eczema you're dying to disguise? Both boys and girls can use makeup to camouflage eczema, though it's best not to use it on weeping sores or open wounds. Don't use any old



cover-up stick - there are products specially designed for people with skin problems like eczema. Make an appointment to see a trained therapist who can show you what to use and how to apply it. The beauty care officer at your local branch of the British Red Cross can help, although you need to be referred by your GP or Consultant.

Moisturising your skin

If you get eczema, you need to keep your skin well moisturised. The best thing to use is your emollient. Cosmetic moisturisers may have added fragrances or colours (*and fancy packaging that sends the price sky-high*).

You'll probably need to experiment to find the right moisturiser for your skin. Many shops will let you have a free sample if you take along a sterile container. When trying out a new cream, test a little on an area of your skin that's not affected by your eczema. Leave it for 24 hours to see if it irritates.

Top Tip:
Need to carry your emollient around with you but don't want to lug a huge jar or bottle in your bag? Use a thoroughly washed and dried camera film container and spoon in a little emollient - it's very discreet and will even fit in your pocket.

Shaving

Many young men with eczema find that they can't tolerate wet-shaving and can only use a dry electric razor.

If you prefer to wet shave, try to avoid shaving foam, unless you've tested one without ill effect. You could try one specially designed for sensitive skin, but it's still a gamble: many sensitive skin products still contain preservatives, soaps and fragrances which can affect eczema-prone skin.

You could use your emollient as shaving cream. It will act as a lubricant and it will also soften and moisturise your skin, reducing irritation. You could also give Aqueous cream (*available from pharmacists*) a try too, though some people find it stings and irritates their skin.

It's best not to splash on after-shave - it usually has a high alcohol content, which will dry out your skin and hurt like hell.

Bathing

Shower gels, soaps and bubble baths may smell and look nice but they'll dry out your skin and play havoc with your eczema. The safest option for keeping clean is to use a soap substitute, such as an emollient cream or oil. You'll find bath products for eczema in any big chemist.

These days, there are loads of fresh-smelling, unperfumed and uncoloured products on the shelves, specially designed for sensitive skins. Not everyone can tolerate these products so, again, finding one that suits you is a matter of trial and error.

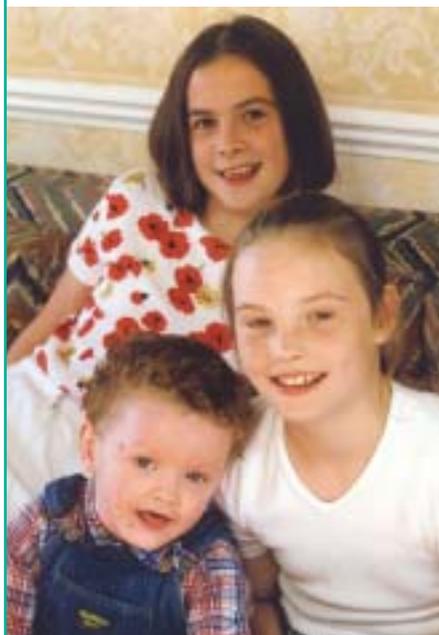
Top Tip:
Tell your friends if you can't tolerate shower gels and soaps - it will save embarrassment when you're staying over at someone's house. Plus, people often give them as presents, and you don't want to look ungrateful, or miss out, do you?

I have less choice than most of my friends when it comes to toiletries, but I have found a few unperfumed products I can use without making my eczema worse. Even though I can't put perfume on my neck or behind my ears, I can usually use it on my wrists.

KAREN, 15

I don't splash aftershave on my face - it's far too painful. But that doesn't mean I can't smell nice. I just spray it on my shirt instead.

ROB, 17



You wear it well

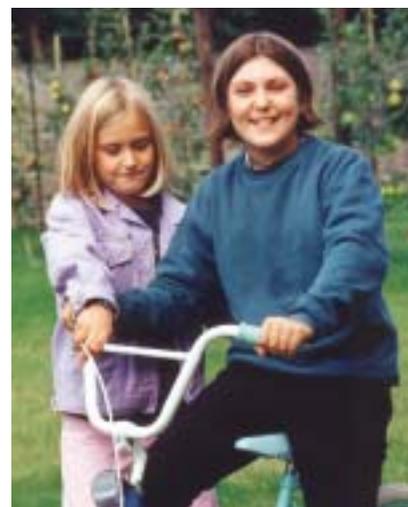
If you've ever spent the day itching under a woolly sweater or getting hot and irritable in a nylon sports top, you'll be aware that fashion designers don't take eczema into account when they're producing trendy clothes.

The good news is it is possible to look - and stay - cool and still keep up with the latest fashions.

What to look for

Clothes made out of 100 per cent cotton are comfy, because they're smooth, soft and keep you cool. And they don't have to be expensive, either. You'll have no problem buying jeans, cotton shirts and t-shirts in most high street stores, such as Gap, Top Shop, Top Man and New Look.

If you're lucky, you'll also be able to wear other smooth, natural materials, like silk and satin. Well-made wool and wool-mix skirts and trousers are often lined with satin, making them hang better and far more comfortable to wear.



If your eczema sometimes bleeds, make sure your clothes can be machine washed easily (*using non-biological washing powders*).

What to avoid

Cheap man-made fabrics like nylon and polyester, which make you hot and sweaty. Rough woolly sweaters, especially polo-necks, otherwise, you'll spend the day scratching yourself raw. If you can't afford cashmere - and who can? - get a slightly bigger size and wear a cotton t-shirt underneath.

- Glitter tends to come off all over your skin and can really irritate.
- Angora wool - the fluff is guaranteed to get everywhere (*even up your nose and in your eyes*), causing itching and irritation.

- Clothes with rough edges - especially around the seams and cuffs.

Buying school uniforms can be a chore since few manufacturers make them in 100 per cent cotton. You might have to shop around or compromise on fabric. Marks and Spencer produces school uniforms in 100 per cent cotton, but doesn't always have them in stock. Asda produces 100 per cent cotton school trousers in several different colours. When you find what you're looking for, buy two at the same time.

Top Tip:
Cut out your clothes labels so they don't irritate the back of your neck. (Plus, you can tell everyone your new shirt is by Prada. Only you'll know it's from Top Shop.)

It's annoying when I go shopping with my mates and they can buy whatever they like. I have to check every label and I can't wear wool or nylon. It's great that denim is so trendy at the moment - everyone lives in t-shirts and jeans anyway, so I don't feel left out.

GEMMA, 15

I feel really self-conscious about the eczema on my arms and legs in the summer, especially when I go swimming. I prefer to wear long-sleeved tops and trousers or long skirts. People never ask why.

ALICE, 14

Working nine-to-five

Let's face it: working out what you want to do when you leave school or college is a nightmare. Having eczema shouldn't stop you following whatever career you've set your heart on. But it's worth bearing in mind that doing some jobs - especially those that involve working with chemicals and other allergens and irritants - might trigger your eczema or make it worse.

The short list of suspects includes: hairdresser, builder, butcher, baker, food processor, horticulturalist, farm-worker, masseur, metal worker, motor mechanic, painter, dentist, dental nurse and printer.

Unfortunately, the armed services, fire brigade and the police can be difficult about taking candidates with a skin problem. Nursing can sometimes be

a problem too, because a nurse needs to be constantly washing her hands.

Nobody can refuse to give you a job because of your skin. A new law - the Disability Discrimination Act - means that it's illegal for an employer to discriminate against you just because you have eczema or any other condition.

You might need to do a bit more planning and research than most people. Talk to your careers adviser and try to get work experience before you decide on a career, so you'll know if it's practical and if you'll enjoy it. Find out about trade bodies and professional organisations and ask if they know if anyone with eczema is doing the job - they may be able to give you tips about how they cope.



I haven't got a clue what I want to do when I leave school. But then, nor have any of my friends. I'm not worried about my eczema though. I've never let it hold me back up till now, so why should it be different when I'm working?

PAUL, 16

Sex, drugs and rock & roll

Eczema doesn't have to be a party pooper. Go out and have a good time - just be sensible.

Dance all you like, but take a short break if you start feeling really hot and sweaty. You can always go to the loo and splash yourself with water. Carry a bit of your cream or emollient in your pocket too, in case you start feeling itchy.

If you're old enough to drink, don't drink too much! Alcohol causes stress on the body, so it can affect your eczema. Drink lots of water throughout the night.

Getting over-tired can trigger eczema. Make sure you get plenty of

sleep both the night before (*you want to look and feel your best*) and the night after a party.

If your eczema does flare up, take it easy the next day. Have a nice warm bath with lots of emollients and give yourself an early night.

Cigarettes won't just make your breath smell - and cause all sorts of nasty illnesses - they also contain lots of chemicals which can irritate your skin.

Taking illegal drugs is never a good idea, but if you've got eczema you're risking a nasty skin reaction too.

Recreational drugs like ecstasy will make you hot, sweaty and dehydrated. Not to mention that nobody knows exactly what concoction of chemicals is in the drugs they're buying. It's not worth the risk.

You already know how important it is to practise safe sex to protect yourself from STDs like chlamydia, herpes and HIV. Whatever anyone says, statistics show they're on the rise among young people, so always use a condom.

Some people with eczema have an allergy to latex, which most condoms are made from. Don't use a latex allergy as an excuse to take a risk



with your health. Non-latex condoms can now be bought in any pharmacy or supermarket. Carry a pack with you, wherever you go. It's not embarrassing and it doesn't make you look cheap - just well-prepared.

This information is provided only as a general guide. Individual circumstances differ and the National Eczema Society does not prescribe, give medical advice or endorse products or treatments. We hope you find these notes helpful but they do not replace, and should not replace the essential guidance, which can be given by your doctor or nurse.

Partying and having the occasional drink doesn't affect my eczema at all. When I'm out having a good time I forget all about my skin, so you could say it helps it!

NICK, 18