

Eczema Linked To Surprising Health Risks

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This itchy skin condition puts 10 percent of the population at risk for some serious side effects.

(Photo: Getty Images)

Eczema goes much deeper than just having itchy skin. According to new research, higher rates of smoking, alcohol consumption and obesity are linked to the 10 percent of the population who suffer from the chronic skin condition.

These risk factors combine to result in a higher risk of cardiovascular disease, including elevated blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes.

“Because eczema often starts in early childhood, people are affected all through their developmental years...it hurts their self-esteem and identity. That’s part of why we see all these negative behaviors,” says [Jonathan Silverberg, M.D.](#), lead study author and assistant professor of dermatology at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine.

The survey analyzed groups of 27,157 and 34,525 adults aged 18 to 85 years from the 2010 and 2012 National Health Interview Study. Researchers found that eczema patients had a 54 percent higher chance of being morbidly obese and 48 percent higher odds of high blood pressure. Additionally, they experienced up to a 93 percent increased chance of pre-

diabetes, a 42 percent more likelihood of having diabetes and a 36 percent increase in high cholesterol.

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Experts say that the study will likely shift how dermatologists treat eczema, by addressing linked behavioral and lifestyle changes in addition to treating the continuous inflammation of skin. Researchers found, for example, that sweat and heat brought on by workouts can flare itching, preventing many patients from being active. That inertia is believed to lead to the higher obesity rates — a vicious cycle that only worsens both health issues.

Fortunately, there have been recent breakthroughs in the dermatological treatment of eczema, says [Rebecca Kazin, MD](#), of John Hopkins Dermatology and the Washington Institute of Dermatologic Laser Surgery. A newer class of drugs known as immune modulators has shown to control flare-ups of rashes and itching without the use of steroids. [Pimecrolimus](#) and [Tacrolimus Topical](#), the two most popular forms of these drugs, work by stopping white blood cells in the skin from producing inflammatory chemicals.

While the most commonly prescribed treatments are still [steroid ointments that reduce itching and inflammation](#), several other options have also shown promising results, says Dr. Kazin. [Phototherapy](#) can work wonders for mild eczema flares by exposing the skin to UVA and UVB waves that soothe symptoms. [Certain antifungal medications](#) may also help. And [antibiotics are used to prevent common infections](#) that can arise from scratching and spreading bacteria.

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It's essential that eczema sufferers figure out and avoid triggers that flare up their condition. "Everything that touches the skin can be a potential irritant, as well as the environment, as well as what you put in your body," says Kazin. Common triggers include fragranced soaps and detergents, shampoo, chlorine, perfume and allergens including pets, pollen, mold and dust.

Eating fish oils found in salmon can help alleviate eczema, as does cutting down on sugar and alcohol, which both cause inflammation. Kazin says that some patients have allergy problems arising from nuts, nut oils, dairy, wheat and soy

that are expressed through eczema.

Applying [barrier repair moisturizers rich in ceramides](#) daily is helpful to reduce water loss and to restore skin health, and avoiding excessive bathing and washing is also critical, advises Kazin. Lastly, extreme environmental exposure to cold, wind, dry air and hot temperatures has been shown to aggravate eczema, too.

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