

Eczema and Psoriasis – Different Causes, Similar Symptoms

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Eczema affects 31 million Americans while psoriasis affects 8 million. Both cause similar rashes but differ fundamentally; eczema stems from compromised skin barrier function while psoriasis is an autoimmune disease
- › Managing eczema effectively involves moisturizing your skin regularly, taking short lukewarm showers, using natural anti-itch treatments like colloidal oatmeal and maintaining consistent home temperatures
- › Formaldehyde exposure from sources like cigarette smoke, household items and damp, moldy environments significantly worsens eczema symptoms, particularly in children
- › Natural psoriasis management strategies include vitamin D optimization, aloe vera application, moderate coffee consumption and using curcumin and garlic for their anti-inflammatory properties
- › To keep your skin healthy, make sure to get adequate high-quality sleep, avoid linoleic acid, and increase your intake of healthy fats and astaxanthin to protect against aging and environmental stressors

Your skin is the largest organ in your body. Aside from providing you with the sense of touch, it also protects your body from pathogens, harmful ultraviolet damage and environmental dangers. It also facilitates important functions that keep your body alive, such as temperature regulation.¹

Due to the various functions your skin performs, it's also susceptible to various diseases, with eczema and psoriasis being the most common examples. According to the University of California, San Francisco, eczema (also known as atopic dermatitis) affects 31 million Americans.² Meanwhile, psoriasis affects more than 8 million Americans.³

Distinguishing the Difference Between Eczema and Psoriasis

One of the main symptoms of psoriasis is a rash, however its appearance varies widely from person to person. People with darker skin tones have rashes in shades of purple with gray scales, while those with lighter skin tones usually have pink or red rashes with silver scaling. Itching, burning, soreness and bleeding are also common symptoms.⁴

In the case of eczema, the rashes are also similar. According to a report from The New York Times, here are the defining characteristics:⁵

"Atopic dermatitis can appear differently on different people. Someone with darker skin might have brown, purple or gray rashes, while the rashes might look pink or red on lighter skin. Regardless, dry, itchy rashes are a hallmark of the condition, and other signs include oozing and thickened or scaly skin, experts said."

While eczema and psoriasis present similar symptoms, that's where their commonality ends. Psoriasis is an autoimmune disease that causes your body to produce skin cells out of control.⁶ Meanwhile, eczema rashes are caused by a compromised skin barrier function, which is made susceptible due to a combination of genetic and environmental factors.⁷ To help you distinguish between the two, the Cleveland Clinic offers additional guidelines:⁸

"Psoriasis plaques cause areas of thick skin covered in scales. Eczema causes a rash of dry and bumpy skin. Eczema also typically causes more intense itching than psoriasis."

If you suspect that you have either psoriasis or eczema, visit your health care provider right away. They'll be able to rule out the causes through various tests. Once a diagnosis is confirmed, you'll be able to select the proper management strategy instead of trial and error.

How to Manage Eczema Effectively

While there's no cure for eczema, there are different ways to help manage its symptoms. Here are some tips for you to try, according to The New York Times:⁹

- **Moisturize your skin** — Keeping your skin moist helps protect its barrier while minimizing flare-ups. Use products that are hypoallergenic and be sure to check the label to make sure it agrees with your skin.

Avoid using fancy, scented moisturizers because they contain extracts and ingredients that could trigger your eczema. "Bland is best when you have eczema," said Dr. Brittany Craiglow, an adjunct associate professor of dermatology at the Yale School of Medicine.

- **Take short showers** — According to Craiglow, long, hot showers and baths tend to dry out your skin. Instead, bathe in lukewarm water, and limit it to 10 minutes or less. Afterward, apply a mild, fragrance-free moisturizer to your skin while it's still damp to keep it hydrated.
- **Use a natural anti-itch cream** — The New York Times suggests a 1% hydrocortisone cream, but the issue here is that it's an over-the-counter topical steroid. Instead, I recommend a safer alternative — colloidal oatmeal cream.

A 2020 study¹⁰ noted "that colloidal oatmeal, a natural product with proven barrier protection, moisturization, anti-inflammatory and soothing properties, can have ameliorative effects on eczema severity symptoms in patients with chronic irritant HE [hand eczema]."

Aside from these tips, there are other strategies available to help you manage eczema effectively without resorting to drugs and pharmaceutical creams. For example, The National Eczema Society recommends keeping your home at a regular temperature to reduce the risks of flare-ups, as well as wearing thin layers of clothing that you can layer or remove as needed.

During the winter months, consider using a humidifier to raise the humidity in your home. In addition, pay attention to body parts sensitive to cold, such as your hands and face when you go outside. Use soft, seam-free clothing to prevent irritation from scratchy hats, scarves and gloves.

Another way to deal with eczema is by managing your stress levels. Research suggests that there's an association between stress and this skin condition. To deal with stress, I recommend exercising regularly, and this is something that the researchers also confirm:¹¹

"Psychological stress is an important factor to consider in the management of patients with AD (atopic dermatitis). In particular, chronic stress tends to worsen AD. The type of stress can possibly also affect the quality of the pruritus experienced by the patients. Unforeseen events and decision making were frequently mentioned as important triggers. Furthermore, physical exercise was reported to provide beneficial effects."

Formaldehyde Exposure Worsens Eczema Symptoms

Research shows smoking cigarettes is a risk factor for eczema due to its formaldehyde content. For those unfamiliar, formaldehyde is a colorless, strong-smelling chemical used in various applications, such as construction and disinfection. Moreover, it's found to be a carcinogen when tobacco is combusted.¹²

In a study published in 2021,¹³ researchers noted that formaldehyde exposure increased the risk of eczema. They selected 55 children with moderate-to-severe eczema and

measured indoor formaldehyde levels in their homes from February 2019 to February 2020.

From their testing, they noted that homes with mold or damp indoors have higher formaldehyde concentrations compared to cleaner homes. Moreover, parents who smoke indoors have even higher levels of formaldehyde, and that this increased the severity of eczema symptoms in children.¹⁴

On a related note, your eczema could be triggered by the things you own, such as your backpack. In a case study published in Cureus,¹⁵ researchers noted that a man who developed symptoms of eczema was caused by contact with his backpack while traveling abroad. Since his skin was in frequent contact with the bag, he eventually developed a pruritic erythematous rash, which subsided when he stopped using the bag.

Based on this information, I suggest you take stock at any clothing and other items that touch your skin, such as bags. If you notice a rash developing, there's a large chance it contains formaldehyde. Companies add this toxin into their products during the dyeing process, as well as to reduce wrinkles in fabrics.¹⁶

Try These Natural Remedies for Managing Psoriasis

Psoriasis is an autoimmune disease, and like eczema, it has no known cure. However, there are ways to manage the symptoms when they flare up. Below are some effective natural strategies for psoriasis, according to a study published in *Inflammopharmacology*:¹⁷

- **Vitamin D** – The "sunshine vitamin" has been shown to help manage autoimmunity, specifically T-cell activity "by lowering T helper (Th) cell proliferation and supporting a transition from a proinflammatory into a more tolerogenic condition." It's also been discovered to inhibit inflammatory cytokines.

A vitamin D level between 60 and 80 ng/mL is ideal for optimizing overall health. To find out if you're in this range, have your blood tested regularly. But before you expose your skin to sunlight, there are some precautions I want to emphasize.

If you've been eating a diet high in LA, your risk of sunburn is elevated. To help reduce this risk, your first step is to cut your LA intake to 5 grams a day or less. Additionally, avoid high-intensity sunlight for at least six months after reducing your LA intake.

Instead of being outside during peak sunlight hours, opt for early morning or late afternoon exposure when the sun's rays are less intense. This approach gives your body time to adjust and helps protect your skin from damage. To protect your skin further, take a daily dose of 12 milligrams of astaxanthin, apply a niacinamide cream, and/or take a low-dose aspirin.

- **Aloe vera** — The gel found in this plant's leaves contains a combination of bioactive compounds, such as aloe-emodin and acemannan that help ease psoriasis symptoms, such as reducing redness and scaling. It also promotes hydration and better healing of wounds by increasing collagen activity. Furthermore, aloe vera has keratolytic activity thanks to the salicylic acid, which helps eliminate psoriatic plaques.
- **Coffee** — If you're not into drinking coffee, I suggest you give it a try, as the study noted caffeine inhibits Th1/Th2 cell proliferation while simultaneously promoting the release of anti-inflammatory biomarkers such as adiponectin. It's also been found to inhibit cyclin Adenosine Monophosphate (cAMP), an immunomodulator.

But don't just buy any coffee beans you find — choose organic beans to protect your health, ideally with a splash of raw, grass fed milk and raw honey to create a truly healthy drink. That said, too much caffeine can cause heart palpitations and insomnia, so drink it in moderation.

- **Curcumin** — The bioactive compound found in turmeric, curcumin, contains antitumor, antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties that help with the management of psoriasis. Similar to caffeine, curcumin works by inhibiting proinflammatory compounds as well targeting signaling pathways related to inflammation.

- **Garlic** – This common cooking ingredient contains bioactive compounds and sulfuric substances that help manage psoriasis. In particular, the researchers noted the efficacy of aged garlic extract (AGE):

"One complicated combination is AGE. Allin, cyclophilin, S-methyl-L-cysteine, S-allyl-L-cysteine, S-acetylcysteine, S-allylmercapto-L-cysteine, S-1 propionyl-L-cysteine, fructose-arginine, and beta-chlorogenic are among its constituents. L-Arginine, L-methionine, and L-cysteine are also present.

Psoriasis is now associated with the activity of the nuclear transcription factor kappaB. Extensive investigation has revealed this path. Garlic (S-allyl mercapto cysteine, diallyl sulfide, ajoene) can inhibit this transcription factor."

Overall Strategies for Skin Health

While psoriasis and eczema both have their respective remedies, there are still other avenues to help optimize overall skin health. Adding more polyphenol-rich foods into your diet, for example, has numerous benefits, including protecting your skin.^{18,19}

Don't forget to optimize your sleep quality, too. I've written about the dangers of sleep deprivation, which you can read about in my article "[Five Habits That Ruin Your Sleep](#)." Notable examples include slower reaction time, impaired memory retention and increased risk of chronic diseases, such as Type 2 diabetes.

In addition to these, research shows that sleep deprivation impacts skin quality. In essence, not getting enough sleep hastens intrinsic aging and impair the skin's ability to recover from external stressors, such as prolonged exposure to UV light.²⁰

Increasing your intake of healthy fats, including omega-3, is also important for healthy skin. If you notice your skin becoming drier, rougher and wrinkly, slightly increasing your intake of it will help. It's involved in processes such as hydration, reducing inflammation, minimizing the effects of sun damage and aging.²¹

However, don't overdo your omega-3 consumption, as it is still a type of PUFA. When consumed in excessive quantities, omega-3 will cause metabolic damage similar to that of omega-6 LA, as it too breaks down into dangerous metabolites known as ALEs (advanced lipoxidation end products).

Remember that most of your calories must still come from carbohydrates, which is your body's ideal source of energy. Also, reduce your intake of LA, as it's a major source of DNA damage and inflammation.

Astaxanthin is another superstar for your skin. It's a carotenoid derived from *Haematococcus microalgae*, and is produced as a protective mechanism to protect them from harsh ultraviolet light and other stressors. In a 2021 meta-analysis²² published in *Nutrients*, researchers noted that astaxanthin helped protect participants from wrinkles and loss of skin moisture, and even improved skin elasticity.

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