



Beat the itch: How advanced therapies are transforming eczema treatment

New approaches aim to provide longer-lasting relief and improve quality of life, says a dermatologist.



Persistent itching is a common and challenging symptom of eczema. Photo: Shutterstock

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As a student, Mr David Low* made every effort to take part in physical education lessons, but eczema flare-ups often kept him on the sidelines.

"I had to steer clear of ball sports when flare-ups on my palms and feet became too painful," he recounted. Diagnosed in lower primary with eczema on his neck and behind his elbows and knees, the condition gradually spread to his extremities by the time he was in National Service (NS).



Also known as atopic dermatitis, eczema is an inflammatory skin condition that, in mild forms, presents as persistent itching or skin dryness, said Dr Mok Zhun Kai, a consultant dermatologist at The Dermatology Practice.

"More commonly, it is characterised by scaly patches and rashes," he added. "When eczema is sub-optimally managed, skin infections may result."

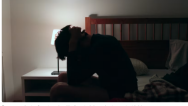
TRIGGERING THE ITCH

Dr Mok explained that patients with eczema usually have a **family history of atopy** – a predisposition to **allergy-related conditions like asthma and allergic rhinitis**¹. Environmental factors such as **allergens like pollen or dust mites, skin irritants from heavily perfumed soaps and detergents, and extreme climates or temperature fluctuations** can also trigger eczema.

During his NS days, **exposure to dust, heat and excessive sunbathing** aggravated Mr Low's eczema, causing it to spread across at least 60 per cent of his body, including his face.



"I carried moisturiser wherever I went because of the unbearable dryness and itch," he said. "I dreaded leaving the house as I had to apply thick layers of moisturiser that left me feeling uncomfortable."



Eczema patients often struggle with disrupted sleep due to constant itching.

Later on, as an IT engineer in the finance industry, Mr Low found it challenging to concentrate at work whenever his eczema flared up. To manage his triggers, he limited strenuous activities, avoided extended sun exposure and refrained from alcohol as well as oily and spicy foods – scallions that made socialising with friends difficult. His nights were often restless due to the constant itching, the **lack of sleep** left him more susceptible to stress, which in turn led to **more frequent flare-ups**.

In individuals with eczema, the **topmost layer of the skin barrier is compromised**, making it less effective at keeping out harmful bacteria and substances. Dr Mok added that patients experience increased transepidermal water loss (water evaporation through the skin), leading to further dryness² and flakiness. "This results in greater skin barrier dysfunction, increasing the risk of developing localised or systemic infections originating from the skin," he said.

LONG-TERM ECZEMA CARE



Over-the-counter moisturisers are usually sufficient for treating dry, itchy skin that is not inflamed.

Since eczema can range from mild to severe, Dr Mok advises patients to assess the extent and severity of their skin rashes before deciding whether to seek medical intervention. For dry, itchy skin that is non-inflamed and affects only small areas, **over-the-counter moisturisers should suffice**, he noted.



"If large areas of skin are affected or become acutely inflamed with symptoms such as oozing or crusting, you should seek medical attention. Furthermore, **fever, swollen lymph nodes** like fever, chills and malaise are red flags that warrant urgent consultation," said Dr Mok.

He explained that eczema treatment varies depending on factors such as the patient's age, lifestyle, existing co-morbidities, current medications as well as the side effect profile of each medication.

Mr Low has undergone various treatments for his eczema, including topical and oral steroids. He was later prescribed immunosuppressants and then monoclonal antibody drugs (targeted therapies that block specific proteins in the immune system) before eventually transitioning to a Janus kinase (JAK) inhibitor, which he continues to take today. A JAK inhibitor is an oral tablet used to treat moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis.



The JAK inhibitor is taken in oral form.

"It took about four to six weeks to see a noticeable improvement. I still need to moisturise twice daily, but my flare-ups, now reduced to once every two weeks, are less severe," shared Mr Low.

According to Dr Mok, everyone responds differently to medication, so patients should discuss their treatment with their healthcare providers.



BREAKING THROUGH THE ECZEMA BARRIER

Beyond medication, managing eczema involves identifying and avoiding triggers, along with making lifestyle changes, such as avoiding hot showers and **staying in a comfortably cool environment whenever possible**.



Eczema patients are advised to practice mindfulness to help manage stress.

"To reduce stress, patients are encouraged to engage in **mindfulness activities**," said Dr Mok. "They should also pay attention to the **itch-scratch cycle** and the subconscious habit of scratching, as this can further damage the skin barrier."

Mr Low remains diligent in his moisturising routine and maintains lifestyle habits aimed at preventing eczema flare-ups. "I feel that my eczema is much more manageable now," he shared. "I can play sports, spend more time in the sun, travel, and most importantly, enjoy uninterrupted sleep."

Assess your skin condition using the **Dermatology Life Quality Index Assessment Tool**³ and learn more about **living with eczema**.

*Names have been changed for privacy reasons.

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¹Alford SH, Zoratti E, Peterson EJ, et al. Parental history of atopic disease: disease pattern and risk of pediatric atopy in offspring. *J Allergy Clin Immunol*. 2004;114(5):1045-1050. doi:10.1016/j.jaci.2004.08.038.
²Uehara Y, Kitabayashi C, Injiko-Paez JE, et al. Intractable Itch in Atopic Dermatitis: Causes and Treatments. *BioMedicine*. 2021;9(2):229. doi:10.1093/biomedicine/bjab029.

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