Atopic dermatitis in children

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Atopic dermatitis (AD) is a common, chronic inflammatory skin disease characterized by severe itching and skin dryness throughout the surface of the body. It usually develops in early childhood, less commonly in later childhood and in adults. Atopic dermatitis in children can have a very early onset, even before 6 weeks of age in infants, and it presents as redness, itching and squamous patches on the face and body.

The distribution and type of skin changes which develop in atopic dermatitis vary depending on the age of the child. Skin dryness is present throughout life, and itching and scratching are the most common signs of atopic dermatitis. In babies, redness and squamous patches appear on the cheeks and face. These children are irritable, restless, easily awoken and attempting to scratch the affected areas. In older infants the redness is localized on the backs of hands, elbow creases and on the knees. In older children and adults, the skin is dry with scratch marks usually around hand wrists and knuckles, on the upper side of feet, elbow creases and knees.

Atopic dermatitis is a disease with a strong genetic component. If one parent has atopic dermatitis, in 60% of the cases the child will also have the disease, whereas if both parents have the disease, the child will also have it in 80% of the cases. Environmental factors also have a significant role in the manifestation of atopic dermatitis. In two thirds of children, atopic dermatitis symptoms recede by the time they turn 10 years of age, and if the disease first appeared in infancy, it usually recedes by the age of 5. In a smaller percentage of children, atopic dermatitis persists throughout life, with phases characterized by regression and exacerbation.

Atopic dermatitis may be accompanied by asthma and allergic rhinitis. This points to a genetic atopic constitution which, together with environmental factors, leads to the manifestation of the disease.

In certain cases, even inadequate baby skin care can contribute to a worsening of the condition. The skin of children with atopic dermatitis is extremely dry because of reduced production of the protective lipid film on the skin surface. The use of aggressive soaps and baths only worsens the condition. Avoidance of wool clothes and other irritants, such as strong detergents and fabric softeners is advised. Children should be dressed to maintain a comfortable body temperature, as overheating can lead to sweating, which also has an irritating effect on the skin. In the household, measures for reducing dust and dust mites should be taken by eliminating rugs, draperies and using vacuumed bed sheets.

The overall approach to a child’s skin treatment is important in alleviating atopic dermatitis. The condition requires the use of emollient creams which act to restore the lack of lipids and reduce skin dryness. This reduces the need for using corticosteroids, which are sometimes required, but are used for short periods of time. Children with atopic dermatitis are prone to bacterial skin infections which only worsen the condition, and need to be eliminated with the use of topical antibiotics. In persistent and long-lasting eczema, excellent results are achieved by topical use of immunomodulating creams.