

Coping With Atopic Dermatitis

Handwashing and mask-wearing can increase the severity of this common skin disorder.

Here's how to avoid a flare and keep symptoms at bay.



Jennifer Brunner-Slaton was in her late 20s when her eyelids became increasingly red and irritated. She made an appointment with a dermatologist to get a cream and get on with life but spent the next 20-plus years trying to soothe the pain and relentless itching that come from [atopic dermatitis \(AD\)](#).

"Keeping my eczema under control has been a long road of trial and error, with a lot of error," Brunner-Slaton said.

AD can start at any age

AD is the most common form of eczema — a chronic inflammatory skin disorder that causes itchy, dry scaly skin — and there's no cure for it. Symptoms vary from person to person, and for women like Brunner-Slaton with severe problems, the constant itch and dry skin can lead to serious infection. It takes a toll mentally as well as physically.

The National Eczema Association estimates that [16.5 million people are diagnosed with AD](#) in the United States alone. The condition is caused by a combination of genetics and immune and environmental factors. So having asthma, allergies or a family history of eczema puts you at higher risk. The skin disorder is most often diagnosed during childhood, however, women in their reproductive years (ages 15 to 49) have a high prevalence of AD.

"In women, hormone changes may act as a trigger for atopic dermatitis, causing a flare of symptoms or a worsening of their condition," said [Dr. Elizabeth Liotta](#), a dermatologist and member of [HealthyWomen's Women's Health Advisory Council](#).

A variety of factors can trigger AD

Liotta notes that AD symptoms may come and go for many patients, but [environmental factors](#) that increase skin dryness and itching (irritants, pollution, diet, climate, etc.) are the most common triggers for a recurrence, also known as a flare.

Other triggers include food allergies and certain household products like soap and detergent. Anxiety and stress can also worsen the condition, so it's no surprise that the uncertainty and public health requirements for the pandemic [can make AD even more difficult to treat](#).

How to help keep your AD under control during the pandemic

At the start of the pandemic, Brunner-Slaton had eczema on her neck, inner arms, hands, wrists, legs and face. "It progressed at its worst last year to unrelenting, bone-deep itch, red skin and open, painful cuts," she said. The emphasis on frequent hand washing and widespread use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers didn't help: Hand gels can be particularly damaging to AD

sufferers and can cause a range of problems from itching to bleeding.

"Washing hands more often has definitely dried them out more," Brunnermer-Slaton said. "I've spent the pandemic turning down hand sanitizer whenever it's offered because it burns, stings and irritates my skin."

To keep hands clean and Covid-19-friendly, Liotta suggests using nonsoap cleansers and skin barrier creams to keep skin soft and moisturized.

Mask requirements have also led to irritation and even an increase in eczema in some patients as particular masks can dry out your skin. Certain materials and the wrong fit can cause redness and inflammation. To avoid irritating your skin, your mask should be tight but not pressed against your face. The National Eczema Society recommends 100% cotton face coverings that can be washed frequently to clear germs, oils and other irritants.

Tackling any health problem during a pandemic is a challenge, but if you suspect that you have AD or your symptoms are getting worse, Liotta recommends putting on your AD-friendly Covid-19 mask to see a dermatologist in person. "The [patient] history is very important in the diagnosis of AD, so potentially the evaluation could be done via telehealth, but there are other skin problems that could cause rashes that would need an in-person evaluation such as a fungal infection, requiring a skin scraping, or a secondary skin infection which would need a bacterial culture," Liotta said.

AD can show up on female genitals and, when it does, it causes irritation, burning and visible signs, such as lesions and changes in appearance and color, in and around the vulva. The skin condition is common in postmenopausal women and is often overlooked or misdiagnosed. "[These types of symptoms] could

be caused by several different skin conditions. I would recommend evaluation by a dermatologist or gynecologist to get an accurate diagnosis," Liotta said.

Tackle AD from a variety of angles

Overall, it's best to seek professional help for AD, but a few lifestyle tweaks may help avoid flares and soothe skin during and after the pandemic. Relaxation techniques including slow, deep breaths, yoga and journaling can help alleviate stress and, in turn, reduce inflammation and itching. Self-care treatments and home remedies can have immediate results. "Oatmeal baths may be helpful to reduce itching, and coconut oil may be soothing to very red dry skin," Liotta said.



While home remedies didn't help Brunnermer-Slaton's eczema, it wasn't for her lack of effort. "I've tried it all: applying things like manuka honey or CBD balm or castor oil to soaking in Dead Sea salt — everyone is different, and some people have found relief with home remedies," she said. "Because I haven't, I advise testing a small patch of skin first if you're applying something, as you may react to it."

Brunnermer-Slaton also spent years applying topical steroids, natural oils and prescription creams; using light therapy; and trying an elimination diet for relief.

Although those treatments didn't help, Brunnermer-Slaton, now 52 years old, recently found an injectable treatment that does work for her. She urges women to stay informed and ask questions about the possible adverse effects of topical steroids before starting or continuing treatment and not to lose hope that you can break the cycle. "There's a lot of new research ongoing, and for that I'm grateful," she said.

