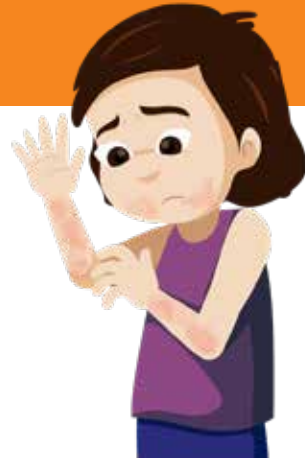


Coping with Itch



Tips on how to manage your child's itch



Itch is a frustrating and unpleasant experience for individuals with eczema. The more we itch, the more we scratch to relieve it through pain, and the cycle repeats. As much as your child wants to stop scratching, it is not as easy as we often make it sound.

Mechanisms of Itch

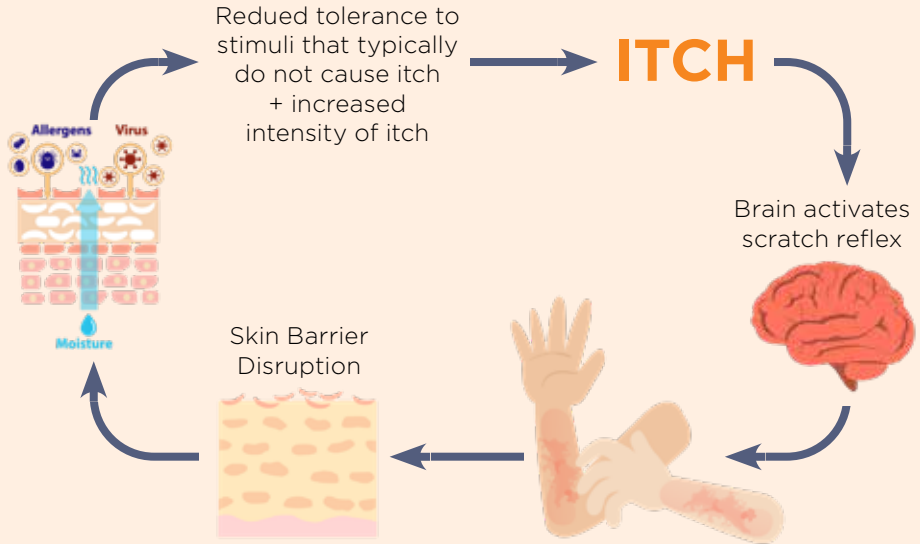
Typically itch starts from nerve fibres being stimulated by nerve endings on the top layer of our skin, which can be triggered by various factors (e.g., irritants, dry skin, and flares). To cope with the itch, nerve pathways are activated and our brain receives the message to respond to the itch by scratching.

This happens from time to time for everyone.

However, itch in atopic dermatitis is complex. There are two types of itch, neurogenic and psychogenic. **Neurogenic** itch occurs when there is a nervous system damage. The brain and spinal cord receive the message from the nerve pathways. **Psychogenic** itch involves itch being stimulated by psychological factors. That is, conscious or mostly unconscious urges to scratch, and our bodies' responses to stress.

Itch-Scratch Cycle

Both types of itch lead to scratching. The behaviour relieves the itch your child feels. This works on a physiological as well as neurological level. After repeating a conscious behaviour over time, the response can become habitual and automatic. Here is a visual on how it works:



How can I help my child reduce his/her itch?

It is important to recognise that the itch will recur. However, we can moderate the intensity of the itch and your child's response to it.

A thorough medical examination with your child's Paediatrician may help identify trigger factors in your child's environment and/or diet. Minimisation or elimination of the factors may help reduce the skin from flaring up.

Beyond that, zinc baths, wet wraps, ointments, and corticosteroids (steroid creams) can reduce inflammation and lubricate the skin, which helps soothe the itching. Antihistamines also relieves some itching temporarily but is only directed at the itch symptoms and does not cure the skin itself.



The psychological treatment for itch and flare-ups, which works conjointly with medical approaches, includes relaxation, breaking the association between itch and automatic behavioural response of scratching, as well as lifestyle changes to alleviate situational stressors.

Psychological Approaches to Coping with Itch

It is not easy to expect your child to use his/her willpower to resist scratching. If we suppress the itch, your child's itch will constantly build up and his/her hand will reach to relieve it after surpassing their threshold.

Rather than struggling to restrain his/her scratching hand, you can help your child replace the behaviour.

Here's how:

1 Scratching hand to soothing hand

- Placing hand lightly onto skin (itchy area), engage in belly breathing and focus on the warm sensation flowing out from the fingers and onto the skin. You can repeat the exercise as often as needed.



2 Habit-reversal therapy

- Increase your child's awareness of scratching and replace the scratching behaviour with a behaviour incompatible with scratching (e.g. closing fist for 30 seconds).
- Prompt your child to engage in the incompatible behaviour through a gradual approach by pairing it with reassuring non-verbal cues, such as, a gentle facial expression, slight smile, and reassuring nods:
 - a. Physical (e.g. changing hand stance to a pinch/press/flat palm)
 - b. Verbal (e.g. verbally reminding child to use more desirable behaviour)
 - c. Gestural (e.g. using your own hands to gesture the desirable behaviour)
- Validate and model self-compassion to your child—"It feels itchy so naturally you will want to scratch. I see that you are working hard to reverse the action to (*desirable action; e.g., clenching your fist*), let's do this together".



3 Pair with behaviour specific praise

- Praise your child every time when they replace scratching with a more desirable behaviour. Using behaviour specific praise highlights what was done well, which motivates your child to do it more, and ultimately reducing the undesirable behaviour of scratching.
- For example, “I know you do not like doing wet wraps. I love how you took deep breaths and tried to do it with me.” This provides a clearer emphasis on the behaviour(s) you want to increase.



4 Engage in activities

- Pairing with the above strategies, you may distract your child with fun activities that your child is interested in. This allows the child to focus their attention on an activity rather than the itch.
- You may also engage your child in relaxation activities such as safe place imagery, and/or stomach breathing. This will allow your child to be mindful of their breathing and/or imagine a relaxing space. There are multiple benefits to this strategy:
 - Refocusing their attention to another activity
 - Relaxation helps with reducing cortisol levels, which is known to increase inflammation and leads to eczema flare-ups



Customise a strategy that helps your child effectively respond to itch. Practice it at least two to three times a day. It may take time to master this strategy, but by persevering together with your child, this will become an effortless response to itch.

About the Khoo Teck Puat – National University Children’s Medical Institute (KTP-NUCMI)

The KTP-NUCMI is the paediatric arm of the National University Hospital and comprises the Departments of Paediatrics, Paediatric Surgery and Neonatology. We provide comprehensive and specialised medical and surgical services for newborns, children and adolescents. NUH is the only hospital in Singapore that offers paediatric kidney and liver transplant programmes. Through a generous gift from the Estate of Khoo Teck Puat, we have set up an integrated outpatient facility with medical, diagnostic and rehabilitation services.

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KTP-NUCMI

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9a Viva-University Children’s Cancer Centre

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