What is Eczema?

The terms **eczema** or **dermatitis** is a general term encompassing various inflamed skin conditions including allergic contact dermatitis and nummular dermatitis. Eczema can be red, blistering, oozing, scaly, brownish, or thickened and usually itches.

One of the most common forms of **eczema is atopic dermatitis** (or "atopic eczema"). Approximately 10 percent to 20 percent of the world population is affected by this chronic, relapsing, and very itchy rash. It can occur at any age but is most common in infants young adults.

In teens and young adults, the patches typically occur on the hands and feet. However, any area such as the bends of the elbows, backs of the knees, ankles, wrists, face, neck, and upper chest may be affected. When it appears on the palms, backs of the hands, fingers, or on the feet, there can be episodes of crusting and oozing. Other eczema patches in this stage are typically dry, red to brownish-gray, and may be scaly or thickened. The thickened areas may last for years without treatment. The intense, almost unbearable itching can continue, and may be most noticeable at night. Some patients scratch the skin until it bleeds and crusts. **When this occurs, the skin can get infected.**

Most people with atopic dermatitis have family members with similar problems, but about 20% of them are the only ones in their family with the condition.

Atopic dermatitis will come and go, often based on external factors. Although its cause is unknown, the condition appears to be an abnormal response of the body's immune system. In people with eczema, the inflammatory response to irritating substances is overactive, causing itching and scratching.

Eczema is not contagious and, like many diseases, currently cannot be cured. However, for most patients the condition may be managed well with treatment and avoidance of triggers.

Types of Eczema (Dermatitis)

Allergic contact eczema (dermatitis): a red, itchy, weepy reaction where the skin has come into contact with a substance that the immune system recognises as foreign, such as poison ivy or certain preservatives in creams and lotions

Atopic dermatitis: a chronic skin disease characterised by itchy, inflamed skin

Contact eczema: a localised reaction that includes redness, itching, and burning where the skin has come into contact with an allergen (an allergy-

causing substance) or with an irritant such as an acid, a cleaning agent, or other chemical

Dyshidrotic eczema: irritation of the skin on the palms of hands and soles of the feet characterised by clear, deep blisters that itch and burn

Neurodermatitis: scaly patches of the skin on the head, lower legs, wrists, or forearms caused by a localised itch (such as an insect bite) that become intensely irritated when scratched

Nummular eczema: coin-shaped patches of irritated skin-most common on the arms, back, buttocks, and lower legs-that may be crusted, scaling, and extremely itchy

Seborrheic eczema: yellowish, oily, scaly patches of skin on the scalp, face, and occasionally other parts of the body

Stasis dermatitis: a skin irritation on the lower legs, generally related to circulatory problems