

“Mummy, help, my skin itches!”

A home care programme launched by the NUH serves to help parents and caregivers better care for children with severe eczema

Unlike adult eczema, which can be triggered by exposure to environmental substances or irritants such as dust mites, detergents and temperature, eczema in children, particularly infants, tends to have a genetic basis. “In many cases, no true food or environmental allergies are found in these children after examination. Only about 10 per cent of children with eczema have allergies to food such as egg and milk,” says Dr Elizabeth Tham, Division of Paediatric Allergy and Immunology, NUH.

But here’s the grim truth: About 15 to 20 per cent of children in Singapore have eczema, some as young as a few months old, manifesting as very dry skin or itchy red patches (below) around the neck, elbows or behind the knees. Says



Dr Tham, “These may worsen in hot weather or dry environments. Severe cases may have red, cracked, bleeding or weepy skin lesions affecting the whole body and infections can set in, resulting in pus formation at affected skin areas.”

In 2014, the NUH established the Eczema Home Care programme to improve the quality of life for affected children admitted for severe eczema flares who do not cope well in an unfamiliar hospital setting, allowing parents to care for their kids in the comfort of home. Each child is assessed by the Paediatric Allergy team on his or her suitability for care in the home setting. According to Dr Tham, kids under the home care programme should not require intravenous drips, should be feeding well and be in a stable condition.

CUSTOMISED CARE PLAN

To prepare them for the home care programme, caregivers will learn to administer a customised step-by-step daily skin care regimen on the child, medication, as well as apply wet wraps. The medical team will ensure that caregivers are confident of what to do before discharging the child. At the same time, kids are also taught not to pick or scratch their itchy skin as this can cause bleeding and may result in

infections. They should also keep their fingernails short and clean.

Under the programme, a nurse and doctor trained in managing children with allergies and eczema will make home visits within a few days of hospital discharge and at frequent intervals thereafter to review the child’s skin condition. “Caregivers will have the opportunity then to clarify any questions or concerns about the child’s condition or skin care regimen. Treatment will be modified according to the child’s individual skin condition,” says Dr Tham.

Once the child’s eczema is under control, the home care team will refer him or her to the outpatient

specialist clinic to continue with follow-up treatment. If the skin condition deteriorates, the child will be referred back to the hospital by the home care team for admission.

According to senior staff nurse Michelle Tan, who is trained in paediatric allergy and immunology, the programme has received positive feedback from patients and caregivers from the start. “It is significant in our continuum of care for some of our patients with severe eczema who have been discharged from the hospital. With the programme in place, specific patients can be discharged earlier, and it also prevents unnecessary emergency visits or admissions.”

CAREGIVERS PLAY A CRUCIAL ROLE
Caregivers need to understand that their role is critical in ensuring the effectiveness of their child’s treatment at home. “It’s important for them to learn the new skills and adhere strictly to the skin care regimen prescribed by the

To get older kids more involved in their treatment, parents should encourage older kids to apply cream on themselves”



The Paediatric Allergy and Immunology team tends to a young patient

team,” says Dr Tham. Some caregivers may have to cope with challenges when applying wet wraps on the children, who may resist as their skin can be itchy or painful during a severe flare. To get older kids more involved in their treatment and healing, Dr Tham also advises parents to encourage them to apply cream on themselves under supervision.

Ultimately, the goal of the programme is “to help many more children with severe eczema receive good treatment in the comfort and convenience of their own home, reduce the family’s health care costs, and improve the quality of life of the children and their families,” says Dr Tham. 🌟