

Habit Reversal Therapy for Eczema

What is habit reversal therapy for eczema?

Habit reversal is a behavioral therapy to **reduce scratching** and give damaged skin time to heal.

What does scratching do in eczema?

Eczema is a chronic inflammatory skin disorder that is characterized by red, dry or scaly skin lesions that can sometimes open, ooze and become bloody. A key symptom of eczema is **itch**, which leads to scratching. This can worsen skin lesions, and lead into the dreaded **“itch-scratch” cycle**. This can happen in the following ways:

1. The skin is damaged by the physical action of scratching. This damage allows irritants, allergens, and even bacteria to enter the skin, which can cause further inflammation and skin barrier breakdown.
2. Scratching itself directly adds to inflammation in the skin and can intensify the itch sensation, resulting in the vicious **itch-scratch cycle**.
3. People with eczema can get caught in the itch-scratch cycle, and scratching becomes a **habit**. The brain interprets scratching as a positive behavior because it relieves the itch and feels good—for a moment! Thus, the behavior is more likely to be repeated. Patients can start to scratch their skin even in the absence of itch and active skin lesions. This behavior can become more generalized, especially in situations that would typically lead to an increase in itching (e.g. feeling anxious, preparing to shower, or getting ready for bed).

In some people it can become difficult to tell how much of their eczema is due to the condition itself and how much is due to skin changes caused by scratching.

How does habit reversal therapy work?

1. **Education:** to understand eczema and how scratching maintains the inflammation causing the itch.
2. **Awareness:** to recognize where and when you scratch. **EczemaWise** by the National Eczema Association is a symptom tracker app that allows you to track itch, pain, and triggers, among other features. It also allows you to rate the intensity of your symptoms on a given day and will display a summary graph for each week. As you gather data, you can begin to eliminate or reduce the time you spend in situations in which you scratch the most in order to promote healing of your skin.
3. **Behavior modification:** to prevent scratching by replacing it with a behavior (**competing response**) you cannot do at the same time as scratching. When a situation triggers itching or an urge to scratch, you can use one of the following competing activities to break the habit. It may take several tries to determine what works best for you. Some competing responses that have been used successfully by patients instead of scratching their itch include:
 - a. Clench fists for 1 minute
 - b. Sit on your hands
 - c. Snap a hair tie or rubber band on wrist
 - d. Play with a bead bracelet, spinner, rubber balls, or other fidget toy to keep hands busy
 - e. Gently apply pressure or lightly pinch the area when other techniques do not provide relief

You can also reduce risk of scratching and protect your skin by: keeping fingernails short, wearing gloves while sleeping, and using prescribed creams/lotions to reduce inflammation and itch.