

# Teens: Eczema shouldn't spoil your fun!



Living with eczema as a teen comes with its own set of challenges. And dermatologist Vivian Shi, MD, should know—she has struggled with it since childhood! Here, Dr. Shi—now the Assistant Professor of Medicine in Dermatology and Director of the Inflammatory Skin Research Program and Eczema Specialty Clinic at the University of Arizona—shares her professional and personal confidence boosters for looking good, feeling good and taking charge of your eczema. —BY KAREN KLEIMANN



## Find your style.

As a lifelong atopic dermatitis (AD) sufferer, Dr. Shi understands that what you wear affects how you feel both physically and mentally. She recommends teens skip wool or itchy textile and go for natural and breathable fabrics like cotton, bamboo, fine linen or silk, including undergarments. “Don’t believe you have no choice but to cover up or have no style. Soft leggings and tights are a great way for teens to get a trendy look without sacrificing their comfort, plus they help topicals penetrate the skin better. Athletic collared shirts can be great for hiding recent flare ups without irritating skin.” Just make sure to wash fabrics before wearing to remove irritants and cut out clothing tags.

## Distract the eye.

Accessories and fun patterns are a great way to focus on something besides your skin. Try a stylish bag, trendy shoes, a bold scarf, funky socks or eye-catching jewelry.

## Focus on your passion!

Whether it’s joining the school band or theater, exploring art

or videography, volunteering or playing sports, Dr. Shi recommends teens put energy into the activities that make them happy. “It not only is a great distraction from the itch or appearance, it also allows you to focus on things outside your eczema and have more fun in social interactions.”

## Play sports with ease.

When it comes to sports or dancing, Dr. Shi says sweat, heat and friction can pose an issue, so take antihistamines and topicals an hour before the activity and wash off as soon as possible afterward; the strategies may help prevent a flare. “A lot of people with eczema don’t sweat when they first start exercising and then suddenly they get a gush of it, making them hypersensitive to their own sweat, which can cause redness and itching.” She recommends talking to your coach so they are aware of your needs and bringing extra clothes, a clean towel and water bottle to wash off, especially your head and neck area.

## Find a listening ear.

Dr. Shi says talking about eczema concerns can help ease anxiety and self-consciousness. “There can be a lot of frustration when teens learn they are not outgrowing their eczema. A lot of my teen patients use an online support group. Expressing those feelings to others who are going through the same thing can be reassuring.”

## Make yourself a priority.

Self-care is equally important to having a social life and is very important for stress management and calming eczema flares, says Dr. Shi. “Be sure to also devote time to activities that are meant for pampering, relaxation and down time,” she says. These may include getting plenty of sleep, walking, listening to music, reading, writing, watching movies or playing games. If you’re interested in a manicure or massage, call first to make sure they can accommodate your eczema needs.

## Have a comeback ready!

Controlling the narrative of your eczema can help you feel more in control and less reactive to how others respond. Dr. Shi recommends letting teachers, nurses, school administrators and fellow students know the facts about eczema, which can help eliminate fear of the condition. Consider having your doctor write a letter to teachers and administrators outlining your specific needs while in school. If you’re meeting someone new or on a date, Dr. Shi recommends a statement like “I have eczema; it isn’t contagious but can make my skin red and itchy. I am working with my doctor to manage it.” When it comes to negative comments, visualizing a barrier around yourself where the negativity bounces off without effect may help you remain confident and in control. 📱

## Take charge of your eczema!

“Mentally, emotionally and physically transitioning the responsibility of eczema from your parents to yourself is a great way to build confidence. When you become independent, it helps build your sense of empowerment,” says Dr. Shi. Her recommendations to get started:

- **Update your individualized action plan** with your doctor to make sure it meets your needs. Ask questions about what next steps you should take, including all your treatment options. Dr. Shi recommends working with a healthcare provider who has experience treating teens living with eczema, since hormones and other changes may require a different treatment approach.
- **Set alerts** for your skincare regimen and medications to keep eczema in check. You can program an alarm on your phone or use an eczema app. “Being proactive is the best way to get ahead of eczema. Research shows a link between a consistent treatment routine and flare ups,” says Dr. Shi.
- **Track and avoid your triggers** as often as possible. This may require some planning when going out with friends or while traveling, such as asking questions about the environment and having relief products on hand like medication, lotion and bandages. Dr. Shi says having an open conversation with friends and dates about triggers such as fragrances and scented lotions can help everyone be more comfortable when hanging out.