



ROOM  
TEMPERATURE  
ITCH  
COTTON  
EMOLLIENTS

# Sleep and eczema

Exchange columnist [John Fuller](#) looks at the importance of sleep and its role within managing and treating eczema.

## Why do we all need sleep?

**No other innate activity comes even close to taking up as much of our lives as sleep and yet the scientific community are not fully agreed on its primary purpose. What we do know is that the brain remains very active during sleep, processing all the data we've taken in during our waking hours, while our bodies undergo essential maintenance such as repairing cells.**

Sleep (or lack of it) affects our daily functioning and our physical and mental health. The amount of sleep that is required varies considerably from one individual to the next. On average, we need between 6 and 10 hours' sleep a night to feel rested and able to function properly the next day. Those who suffer regularly from poor sleep – one in three of us, according to the NHS – are at risk from obesity, heart disease, diabetes and

depression. Insomnia is frustrating, stressful and can also lead to a flare-up of eczema as you lie there in bed, tossing and turning and fretting about that work proposal with a looming deadline.

Interrupted and poor-quality sleep can be the result of any number of things. Common causes are babies and small children, stress, sickness, environmental factors such as temperature, noise and light (including the so-called 'blue light' that emanates from computers, tablets and mobile phones), stimulants such as caffeine, alcohol and nicotine ... and, for those of us with eczema, there is also the dreaded itch! In fact, night-time itching and scratching and the resulting loss of sleep can have a devastating effect – not only on the individual with eczema, but on their partner and family too.

## Cycles and stages of sleep

Sleep throughout the night consists of a series of cycles, the first lasting 70-100 minutes and subsequent others lasting around 90-120 minutes. During a normal sleep cycle we pass through five stages of sleep.

**Stage 1** is light sleep when we can be easily awakened and our muscles may twitch. In **stage 2** the brainwaves become slower and by **stages 3** and **4** we have entered deep sleep. **Stage 5** is rapid eye movement (REM) sleep when our breathing becomes faster and more shallow, and our eyes dart around but our limbs are still. If you wake up during REM sleep, you may remember dreaming. Approximately 20% of the time asleep is spent in REM sleep, during which it is more difficult for the body to regulate its temperature.

Given that many of us who suffer with eczema find keeping a steady skin temperature difficult at the best of times, this presents an additional challenge.

## Which sleep issues are particularly relevant to eczema?

The two most significant factors when discussing sleep and eczema have to be **itch** and **temperature**.

The body's temperature control mechanism is often flawed in eczematous skin, and overheating is common, especially if you are using a lot of greasy emollient. For many people, sweat is also a trigger. It stands to reason that the bedroom environment is hugely important, so here are a few ideas:

- **Room temperature** is a core starting point. If overheating is an ongoing issue, then how about opening the window (unless pollen is a trigger for your eczema) or using a fan on a quiet setting? Use a lighter duvet (check the number of 'togs' – the units of thermal resistance in textiles – a lower tog rating, e.g. 1.5-4.5, indicates that it's light weight) or thin cotton blankets.



- Remember to alter any **pre-set heating**. My eczema has gone haywire after waking up in what felt like a Turkish sauna because I'd forgotten to switch the heating off overnight ... easily done!
- **Controlling the itch of eczema** is by no means just a night-time issue but, unless your skin feels calm, drifting off can be incredibly difficult. How can you achieve this? Well, although there's no single magic formula, the golden rule is this: don't go to bed with dry skin. Using emollients and other treatments well in advance – thus allowing time for them to soak in and not overheat your skin if you're using a thick ointment – is a wise move.
- My trusty faithful remains the **ice pack** – wrapped in a thin tea towel to stave off any risk of ice burns – there is a good deal of choice. The blue frozen packs used for picnics are handy, but to be of any use for eczema they have to be able to get very cold, which not all of them do!

## Antihistamines

Taking oral antihistamines for their sedating effect (unfortunately, they do not actively calm the itch or treat the eczema) is one route that I frequently resort to an hour or so before bed – but it is not a long-term solution. Treating the eczema and trying to establish some control is more important.

A brief personal observation about antihistamines – I regularly take hydroxazine (brand name 'Atarax') and it works well but two things happen: you can feel incredibly sluggish the next day and the doses invariably escalate as your body gets used to it.

In short, medication to aid sleep should always be a temporary fix during a bad period with your eczema.

## Patterns of behaviour

So much of what we experience with eczema is tied up in cycles of behaviour. The 'itch-scratch' cycle in particular comes to mind, but also how a lack of sleep rapidly feeds into that.

It only takes a few days of poor sleep before it becomes more difficult to think clearly, function properly and cope mentally with what life throws at us.

Without adequate sleep, living with and managing eczema rapidly becomes a lot more challenging, both for those with the skin disease and those caring for and living with that person.

Once, when I was admitted to hospital in Yorkshire with uncontrollable, infected eczema, I had been without proper sleep for months. It was an appalling time in my life, when I had got used to being awake all night.

Patterns of behaviour are again relevant here. Our bodies get used to – and expect – a certain

## Sleep tips

Experts recommend that everyone follows some basic good sleep habits:

- Try to stick to a regular bedtime/ waking time, even at weekends.
- Wind down for an hour or so before you go to bed – listen to soothing music, have a bath, practise relaxation techniques, etc.
- Avoid watching TV, using a computer, phone or games console, and working in your bedroom.
- Make sure your sleeping environment is as dark and quiet as possible, and keep the temperature cool.
- Choose your mattress and bedding carefully.
- Avoid heavy meals, caffeine, alcohol and nicotine for at least 2–3 hours before you go to bed.
- Take regular exercise.

amount of sleep and once those usual times are disrupted, it's possible to get out of sync.

Sometimes we do this deliberately – for example, when we're on holiday in another time zone from the UK. But if we unintentionally get used to not sleeping, it's common to experience nausea and feel mentally drained, neither of which help with being motivated to battle with eczema.

## The power of bedding

It stands to reason that since we spend about one-third of our lives in bed, it ought to be comfortable! A top-quality bed and mattress doesn't come cheap but it's a rock-solid investment.

Choose a bed frame that allows air to circulate and make sure you try out the bed and mattress before you buy. There are many different types of springs and synthetic or natural mattress fillings (including 100% cotton), so do your research carefully and choose one that will offer the right level of support, absorb moisture and not cause you to overheat. Memory foam in particular should be avoided as it can become very warm. Manufacturers generally recommend that you replace your mattress at least every 10 years due to wear and tear, not to mention the accumulation of sweat and house-dust-mite droppings during that time (both of which can aggravate eczema).

If house-dust-mite allergy is a trigger for your eczema, use protective covers on pillows, duvets and mattresses, making sure that the mattress is completely covered and not just protected on the top and at the sides.

It's best to have duvets made of synthetic material as these can be washed and dried easily – regular washing at a hot temperature is recommended to remove skin debris, house-dust-mite droppings and the build-up of emollients.

If possible, opt for top-quality duvet covers and sheets as these will be in direct contact with your skin. 100% cotton is generally the fabric of choice for people with eczema as it is cool, breathable, absorbs moisture and washes well at 60°.

Other suitable materials are sateen (a fabric made from woven cotton, which has a soft,

silky-like feel to it) and percale (a close-woven fabric that comes in either 100% cotton or a blend of fabrics).

Meanwhile, bamboo is another raw material that should translate well to bedding. I've yet to try bamboo sheets but anecdotal feedback from friends gives a resounding thumbs-up.

All of the above are worth investigating if you decide to upgrade your sheets, duvet covers and pillow cases, but it takes some detective work to make sure you're sourcing quality products that will actually feel better against your skin.

Another way to judge bedding is by its thread count. Thread count relates to the amount of threads (width and length) that make up an inch of woven fabric and this tells us how closely woven the fabric is. A typical, inexpensive sheet might have a count of 150, whereas more expensive bedding – like the Luxury Hotel Collection sets from House of Fraser that we recently bought for our home – have a 500-count and feel ridiculously soft while also crisp and cool to get into. Admittedly, their 'Blue Cross Sale' label might have swung the decision!

Don't let numbers dominate the decision, though, as the quality and fineness of the yarn trumps thread count every time. Reputable retailers like House of Fraser, John Lewis or The White Company will ensure you end up with the genuine article.

Disrupted sleep would likely be in many people's top three, if asked to name the worst things about eczema. A proper night's rest is fundamental to all, so I hope these tips will give you the best chance of nodding off and sleeping through the night.

Sleep well... Zzzz<sup>z</sup>