

CLOTHES

MAKE THE (WO)MAN



Alice Lambert, NES Director of Services, discusses how to reconcile comfort with fashion when you have eczema

When you have eczema, deciding what to wear is more than a sartorial or aesthetic choice. I imagine many of us have, at some point, succumbed to the temptation to wear a risky but attractive item of clothing (perhaps given to us as a present), only to tear it off within minutes because it feels as though it's been liberally sprinkled with itching powder. Spending a day in clothes of the 'wrong' material or style can be a highly uncomfortable, unpleasant experience, not dissimilar to spending the day in a burlap sack or horsehair-lined straitjacket. As well as its potential for skin irritation, we need to think about how well an item of clothing is likely to interact with creams and ointments, whether it will cope with frequent washing, and the extent to which it will inhibit scratching.

Enemies of the eczematous state

Prime itch-inducing culprits of the material variety include wool and synthetic materials such as polyester and nylon. These textiles can cause overheating, sweating and irritation, which lead to itchiness. Other fabrics that can exacerbate eczema include sequins, leather, lace, fake fur, tulle, velvet and denim. Rough seams, scratchy labels, dyes and fastenings (e.g. zips, buttons and poppers) can also cause problems for sensitive skin.

The eczema-friendly triad

Cotton (preferably 100%) tends to be the most commonly recommended textile for people with eczema. Cotton is soft, cool, great at absorbing sweat, easily washable and allows the skin to 'breathe'.

'Cotton rich' blends can contain a significant proportion of polyester, so be sure to read labels carefully to see exactly what proportion of cotton is included before you buy.

Bamboo, another soft, breathable material, is more absorbent than cotton, highly effective at regulating temperature (keeping you cool in summer and warm in winter) and has antibacterial properties.

Bamboo can be confusing – the bamboo in clothing is generally described as 'bamboo viscose' or 'viscose derived from bamboo'. It tends to be teamed with cotton and a proportion of elastane/spandex/lycra. The processing of bamboo viscose is chemical intensive and not very environmentally friendly, but the material has the properties that make bamboo an attractive option to people with eczema.

An equally eczema-friendly option that is more environmentally friendly is **lyocell/TENCEL™**. This is a cellulose fibre derived from bamboo or wood pulp in a closed-loop manufacturing system that uses less toxic chemicals and recycles almost 100% of solvent in the process.

Silk conjures up images of glamour and decadence – which can be unhelpful when trying to persuade NHS England to continue to allow people with eczema to obtain silk garments on prescription in secondary care! Silk is another good regulator of body temperature that is also soft and breathable.

As well as ordinary silk clothes, it's possible to buy close-fitting silk garments specifically designed for people with eczema. These garments are usually worn underneath regular clothes.

Ordinary silk clothes (as opposed to therapeutic garments) are less practical than cotton or bamboo: silk can't be washed as easily and creams are more likely to mark it.

Other material considerations

Another material that people sometimes report as being eczema-friendly is **merino**, which is interesting considering it's made from the dreaded wool! Superfine merino wool has a thinner fibre diameter than ordinary wool, which means it doesn't cause itchiness like ordinary wool. Merino has great insulation properties and does a sterling job of absorbing moisture, resisting fire and repelling liquid.

Linen is another natural material that can feel comfortable for people with eczema, but it needs to be fine linen (some linen is rough).

Dressed to the nines

Shopping

- Traipsing from overheated shop to overheated shop, especially in winter when you're wearing a thick coat, and repeatedly taking off and putting on clothes, can be an itchy experience. Online shopping is arguably an eczema-friendlier process – you just need to be prepared to send clothes back if they're not satisfactory.
- Take your time trying on clothes, whether

that's in a shop dressing room or in your own home. Turn items inside out to feel whether there's anything not immediately visible that might irritate your skin.

Style

- Opt for looser clothes that allow your skin to breathe. Tight clothes may rub and make you itchier. If you have to wear a tie at work, leave the top button of the shirt undone. Choose clothes that give you reasonably easy access to itchy areas, so you can scratch without ruining the clothes' shape.
- Some types of clothing, particularly underwear, will contain synthetic material (e.g. elastane/spandex/lycra) for elasticity purposes. You may need to compromise between the material used and the design itself, and accept that in order to get the style and fit that's least irritating to your skin, you may have to work with a lower percentage of your desired material (e.g. 80% instead of 100%). Where pants are concerned, deep waistbands – with fabric-covered elastic – tend to be preferable to thin strips of elastic, which can cut into the skin.
- Make the most of warm weather by wearing as few clothes as possible (depending on context!). As fashion designer Cristóbal Balenciaga said, 'Elegance is elimination'. Bare skin is less likely to itch than clothed skin, and gentle sun exposure tends to improve eczema. If you feel self-conscious about your skin, there is a wide range of stylish, 100%-cotton, spring/summer clothes available from different outlets, which will hopefully boost your confidence.



Trimmings

- ② Cut any tags or labels off, and cover thick seams with silk to stop them from causing itchiness. You might also consider wearing clothes that not many people are going to see (e.g. pyjamas) turned inside out to avoid chafing labels.

Washing

- ② Wash clothes after buying them before wearing them, whether you buy them in a shop or online. Washing clothes before wearing them will remove potentially irritating excess dye and chemicals that may have been used in the production process or to prevent mould growing on them during shipping.
- ② Softness is important to people with eczema, but fabric softeners can irritate some people's skin! If possible, use a tumble drier to dry clothes, as this makes them softer.
- ② Clothing absorbs a certain amount of emollient residue, so it's important to wash clothes regularly. Adding an extra rinse cycle to your wash can make a big difference. Steer clear of naked flames, as emollients are flammable.

Wolves in sheep's clothing

Two clothing areas can be particularly tricky for people with eczema to navigate: bras (especially for women with larger busts) and uniforms.

Bras

Where bras are concerned – in addition to the materials – the straps, fastenings at the back and underwiring can all cause itchiness. If you have a small bust you might find it more comfortable to go without

a bra altogether, especially during the winter months when you're wearing more layers. It's also possible to get plain crop top/bralette/sports bra-style bras that are mostly made from cotton with a small proportion of elastane.

Larger-busted women will need more heavy-duty support, and unfortunately outlets in the UK that offer bras in larger sizes with a high proportion of cotton or silk seem to be rarer than hens' teeth. If cotton is the most important element for you, Miss Mary does bras with a high proportion of cotton, and wide straps. If seam-free, non-wired bras appeal, Bravissimo does some for larger sizes, but they're not made of cotton or silk.

Uniforms

We often hear via the Helpline and on Facebook from parents whose children's school uniforms are causing them itchy grief. If you're in this situation, we encourage you to ask the school if your child can wear items of clothing that are identical to the school uniform but which are made from a different material (e.g. 100% cotton).

Our School Information Pack contains information on eczema and school uniform, amongst other school-related issues and triggers, and may help you to broach the subject with the school. If you'd like a hard copy, please let us know via e-mail at helpline@eczema.org

Likewise, if you're expected to wear a uniform at work and it's causing you discomfort, speak to your manager about the possibility of wearing a substitute that looks as similar as possible to the regular uniform but is made from a different material. If there's no scope to adapt, a 100% cotton t-shirt worn underneath can act as a barrier.

'Fashions fade, style is eternal' (Yves Saint Laurent)

Nowadays there's a reasonable amount of choice where materials, and certainly styles, are concerned. Having eczema and enjoying and expressing yourself through clothes shouldn't be mutually exclusive.

There are some exciting new materials in the pipeline too... The developers of ioncell, for example, say their technology "turns used textiles, pulp or even old newspapers into new textile fibers sustainably and without harmful chemicals. The process converts cellulose into fibers which in turn can be made into long-lasting fabrics." The fibres are soft, so they may be comfortable for people with eczema.

<https://ioncell.fi/>



Perhaps we'll all be walking around in clothes made from recycled cardboard in a few years hence. And in the meantime, we can be thankful that corsets and ruffs are no longer in vogue!

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