

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/>

Stockists...

Cotton stockists

- **Fat Face**, stores UK-wide, 0330 124 0000, www.fatface.com, customerservices@fatface.com
Adults' organic cotton fashion

- **Gossypium**, Enterprise Works, Beach Road, Newhaven, East Sussex BN9 0BX, 01273 514 101, www.gossypium.co.uk, info@gossypium.net
Organic cotton collection for adults focused on yoga wear.

- **The Healthy House**, The Old Co-op, Lower Street, Ruscombe, Stroud GL6 6BU, 01453 752 216, www.healthy-house.co.uk, info@healthy-house.co.uk
Adults' and children's silk gloves and adults' cotton gloves.

- **John Lewis**, stores UK-wide, www.johnlewis.com
Cotton fashion for adults, children and babies.

- **Marks & Spencer**, stores UK-wide, www.marksandspencer.com
Cotton fashion for adults, children and babies.

- **Natural Collection**, c/o Spark Etail Ltd, Follingsby Avenue, Follingsby Park, Gateshead NE10 8HQ, 0333 400 0463, www.naturalcollection.com
Organic cotton adults' and children's clothing.

- **Nomads**, Nomads Clothing, Priory Yard, Launceston, Cornwall PL15 8HU, 01566 777 567,

- www.nomadsclothing.com, mailorder
@nomadsclothing.com
Organic cotton fashion for women; cotton shirts for men.

- **People Tree**, 26 Camden High Street, London NW1 0JH, 020 7042 8900, www.peopletree.co.uk, people@peopletree.co.uk
Organic cotton and lyocell/TENCEL™ fashion for women.

- **Spirit of Nature**, c/o Spark Etail Ltd, Follingsby Avenue, Follingsby Park, Gateshead NE10 8HQ, 0333 400 1800, www.spiritofnature.co.uk
Organic cotton adults' and children's clothing, and eco nappies.



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!

Clothing stockists

Thanks to our Facebook followers for their clothing tips and outlet recommendations! If you have any more suggestions, especially for bras and outlets that contain fashionable 100% cotton clothing for men, please let us know (helpline@eczema.org).

Most of the suggestions below also contain clothing made from less eczema-friendly materials, so you may need to dig around the sites a bit to find what you're looking for!



Bamboo stockist

● **BAM Bamboo Clothing,**

Airport Business Centre,
10 Thornbury Road, Plymouth,
Devon PL6 7PP, 01752 581 458,
www.bambooclothing.co.uk
Adults' bamboo viscose clothing.

Silk stockists

● **Allergy Best Buys,** Clientbase

Fulfilment Ltd, Woodview Road,
Paignton TQ4 7SR,
01274 56 56 99,
www.allergybestbuys.co.uk,
customerservices@
allergybestbuys.co.uk
*Therapeutic silk clothing: adults'
and children's garments.*

● **DermaSilk,** Espère Healthcare

Ltd, Shefford House, 15 High
Street, Shefford, Bedfordshire
SG17 5DD, 01462 346 100,
www.dermasilk.co.uk,
chesca@esperehealth.co.uk
*Therapeutic silk clothing: adults',
children's and babies' gloves
and garments.*

● **Dreamskin © Health Limited,**

The Melon Ground, Hatfield
Park, Hatfield, Hertfordshire
AL9 5NB, 01707 260 505,
www.dreamskinhealth.co.uk
*Therapeutic silk clothing: adults',
children's and babies' gloves
and garments.*

● **Skinnies,** Dermacea Ltd,

Dermacea House,
1 Western Road, West Hagley
DY9 0LB, 01562 884 898,
www.skinniesuk.com,
info@skinniesuk.com
Therapeutic silk clothing: adults',

*children's and babies' gloves and
garments.*

Nightwear & underwear

● **Bravissimo,** stores UK-wide,
01926 459 859,
www.bravissimo.com
*Bras for big busted women,
including non-wired and
seam-free.*

● **Classic Intimates,** The Bra
Shop Morecambe, 299 Marine
Road Central, Morecambe
LA4 5BY, 01524 426 611,
www.classicintimates.co.uk
*100% cotton women's
underwear.*

● **Cotton Comfort,** PO Box 637,
Wetherby Road, York YO26 0DQ,
0844 245 1168,

www.eczemaclotting.com
*100% cotton adults' and
children's nightwear, underwear,
gloves, socks, tights and leggings.*

● **Gingerlily,** 2 Morie Studios,
4 Morie Street, London SW18 1SL,
020 8877 9905,

www.gingerlily.co.uk,
sales@gingerlily.co.uk
Women's silk nightwear.

● **GreenFibres,** 99 High Street,
Totnes, Devon TQ9 5PF,
01803 868 001,

www.greenfibres.com
*Organic cotton adults' and
children's nightwear, underwear,
socks, tights, vests, and 100% silk
women's underwear.*

● **H J Hall,** 0116 244 1342,
www.hj.co.uk

*Adults' non-restrictive socks
with a high proportion of cotton
(search for 'diabetic socks').*

● **Miss Mary,** 0800 088 57 08,

www.missmary.co.uk,
contact@missmary.co.uk
*Bras with a high proportion of
cotton, and wide straps.*

● **People Tree** (see details under
'Cotton stockists').

Women's cotton underwear.

● **ScratchSleeves,** Threeways,

Sleepers Hill, Winchester,
Hampshire SO22 4ND,
01962 890 210,
www.scratchsleeves.co.uk,
info@scratchsleeves.co.uk
*100% cotton pyjamas and
specially designed sleeves to help
prevent scratching in babies and
young children.*

● **Suzanne Charles,** Units 22 &
24, High Barns Farm, Roxton,
Bedford MK44 3ET,
01234 871 901,

www.suzannecharles.co.uk
*100% cotton women's nightwear
and underwear, and men's
underwear.*

School uniform

● **Cotton Comfort** (see details
under 'Nightwear & underwear').

● **EcoOutfitters,** 07540 374 395
or 07506 568 172,
www.ecooutfitters.co.uk,
info@ecooutfitters.co.uk
*Organic cotton school uniform
and P.E. kit.*

● **Marks & Spencer** (see details
under 'Cotton stockists').
*Search for the 'SkinKind' range for
school uniform.*

I NO LONGER WORRY ABOUT WHAT PEOPLE THINK OF MY ECZEMA

Ellie Marsh (21) shares her
experience of eczema and
how dancing has taken her
confidence to new heights.



Living
with
eczema

Photography by Jack Thomson



My eczema first started when I was 4 months old and, quite quickly, became really severe. My face, in particular, was badly affected. Red and sore, it would crack and bleed – which was very painful – and my skin creases soon followed suit.

There's no history of eczema in my family and, as I'm an only child, my parents were therefore on a steep learning curve, caring for a new baby and getting to grips with a challenging and incurable condition, of which they had no experience. I'm lucky in that all their hard work, and the effort that went into trying different things when I was younger, means that I'm now very aware of my triggers – including stress, illness and changes in temperature – and the various ways in which I can help myself.

One of my parents' best discoveries, which I still use to soothe my skin today when it is sore and inflamed, is the 'porridge oat bath'. It sounds

strange, but putting a handful of porridge oats in a clean pop sock – remembering to tie the top in a knot! – and dropping it into a bath makes the water milky and smooth.

My Mum's greatest regret during those early years is that she held back from applying as much steroid cream as she should, as she was nervous about using it on my skin. Consequently, she feels she put me through unnecessary pain and discomfort and regrets not using the full amount prescribed. It does mean though that I know to apply steroid preparations **as soon as** a flare-up begins, rather than letting it take hold first, and to use the **entire** recommended amount.

Miraculously, my eczema disappeared almost overnight when I was 7 years old. Nobody could work out why. It just seemed to fizzle out, although I would still get a little soreness around my mouth if it was really cold outside.

My first real memories of eczema are when it came back with a vengeance