

Nine in ten skin specialists claim eczema rise in children

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In a recent snapshot survey, a staggering nine in ten dermatologists and dermatology nurses see childhood eczema as the biggest problem facing paediatric dermatology in the UK.

The survey was conducted by the skin disease research charity the British Skin Foundation, who asked 123 consultant dermatologists and dermatology nurses to name one skin disease they felt had increased in the last three years to a 'problematic scale'. An overwhelming 108 (88%) of the 123 respondents stated they felt childhood eczema was the biggest issue in childhood skin disease. The news comes after the revelation last week that breastfeeding does not protect babies against developing eczema as was once believed.

The only other diseases named in the survey were Xeroderma Pigmentosum (more commonly known as 'XP'), psoriasis and dermatitis, each receiving only 1% each of answers. A further nine per cent of dermatological staff surveyed felt there was no one particular skin disease in children that had grown to be a pressing issue in recent years.

The survey was conducted at the British Association of Dermatologist's AGM in London at the start of July 2011. When asked the same question regarding any notable rises in skin disease in adults, a fifth (22%) felt that malignant melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer, had become the biggest problem. A further 28% of skin the skin specialists felt that that they had seen a noticeable increase in adult eczema cases.

Skin disease is now the most common reason why people consult their GP for the first time in England and Wales, with eczema believed to affect as many as one in ten infants in the UK. Eczema can affect both sexes equally and usually starts in the first weeks or months of life and can carry on through to adulthood. About three quarters of children with eczema will be clear of it by their teenage years, though many people underestimate the effects of the disease regardless of age – ranging from sleep deprivation and pain to constant infection and even death (through infection) if the eczema is extremely severe.

A record-breaking ten year study of eczema, The *International Study of Asthma and Allergies in Childhood* (ISAAC), showed that the levels of childhood eczema seen in the UK ranked amongst the highest in the world. According to the study, six to seven year olds in the UK saw the greatest rise in eczema. It was also the ISAAC study that showed that babies who were exclusively breastfed for four months or longer were just as likely to develop eczema as those weaned off breast milk earlier on.

Although there are a number of possible explanations for the increase in childhood eczema in the UK, there is not one definitive cause that has been outlined. One argument suggests that it is primarily down to environmental factors such as increased levels of pollution and city lifestyles, as it would be highly unlikely that genetic factors would have such a dramatic impact on incidence levels in such a short space of time. Increasing use of soaps, shower gels and harsh cleaning products, especially in developed countries, could also help explain some of the increases being seen.

A leading voice in eczema research and spokesperson for the British Skin Foundation, Professor Hywel Williams, commented on the findings of this survey and the ISAAC study that he was heavily involved in: “We have to be aware that the increase in childhood eczema may be a reflection of changes in referral patterns or increased awareness in the population. However, the increases in eczema suggested in this BSF survey support what was found in half a million children participating in the International Study of Asthma and Allergies in Childhood (ISAAC), which suggests that eczema appears to be on the increase worldwide, especially in younger children.

“Why eczema should be increasing is not so clear, and such changes over a short time cannot be explained purely by genetics. The changes cannot be explained by any known single environmental risk factor for eczema, and it is possible that increased susceptibility to sensitisation due to early life events plus increased disruption of the baby’s skin barrier from cleansing products is part of the story.”

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For more information about the survey, or to talk to Professor Hywel Williams, contact Bevis Man, Press Officer at the British Skin Foundation. T: 0207 391 6347 E: bevis@britishskinfoundation.org.uk W: www.britishskinfoundation.org.uk

The British Skin Foundation (BSF) is a charity committed to raising funds for skin disease research. 100% of the money raised for the charity goes back into funding vital research. Over the last four years, the BSF has awarded in excess of £2.7 million to numerous studies that aim to find new treatments and eventually cures for the many skin diseases in the UK.

Articles in the Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology (JACI) can be viewed online:
<http://www.jacionline.org/home>

Study details: Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology April 2008, 121 Issue 4, p947-954, “Is eczema really on the increase worldwide?” H. Williams^a, A. Stewart^b, E. von Mutius^c, W. Cookson^d, H. Ross Anderson^e. International Study of Asthma and Allergies in Childhood (ISAAC) Phase One and Three Study Groups. DOI: 10.1016/j.jaci.2007.11.004

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