I am a breast-feeding mother, and my baby was just diagnosed as having eczema. Marcus is only 7 months old, and I have avoided formula because I didn’t want him to get allergies like I have. What can I do?

Eczema

Eczema is a term sometimes used loosely for conditions such as “poison ivy contact dermatitis” or “seborrheic dermatitis.” Most probably, though, your son has “atopic dermatitis.”

This condition may affect infants as young as 2 to 6 months old. It will be prominent in the joint folds of the skin, and is sometimes called flexural eczema. Adults will often have only a couple of patches of it.

Atopy often occurs in family members, so genetics probably play a role. Your breast-feeding may have minimized the extent of the problem, but as in so many situations, Marcus may also have an underlying tendency to the disorder. About 12 to 15 percent of American children have atopic dermatitis or eczema; asthma is often associated with the condition. People with eczema usually have “allergic” type IgE antibodies to simple, everyday substances. Allergy is thought to play a role in eczema.

You may find that your baby will benefit by warm (not hot) baths into which you have placed some colloidal oatmeal (Aveeno). Avoid perfumed oils and talcs. Stick to hypoallergenic, gentle soap—or avoid soap altogether.

Scratching can be a problem, because it may be a causative factor in making things worse. I would suggest mittens at night if this is a feature with your baby.

Steroid-based creams are a standard, but on a baby so young I suggest you follow the doctor’s advice.

There is a new ointment called Protopic or Tacrolimus, which seems to show promise. I would advise waiting, though, until there is more experience with it before using it on baby. As he grows older, the eczema may disappear; but if not, there will be more potent preparations he would tolerate.

Allan R. Handysides, M.B., Ch.B., F.R.C.P. (c), is director of the General Conference Health Ministries Department; Peter N. Landless, M.B., B.Ch., M.Med., F.C.P.(SA), F.A.C.C., is ICPA executive director and associate director of Health Ministries.

While this column is provided as a service to our readers, Drs. Landless and Handysides unfortunately cannot enter into personal and private communication with our readers. We recommend that you consult with your personal physician on all matters of your health.