

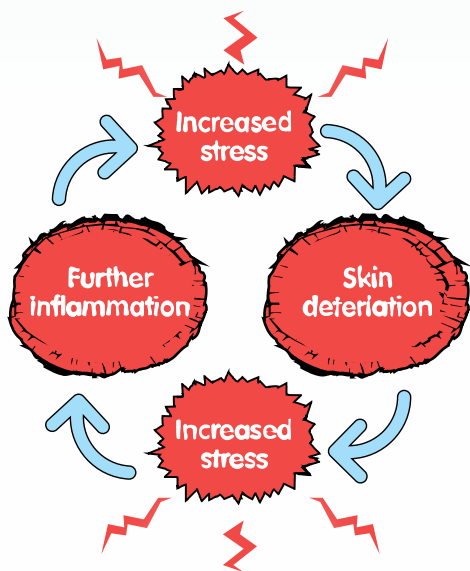
# Managing



# STRESS

**Managing your stress is so important for managing your eczema, but when life's busy it can be hard to know where to start.**

In the NES landmark 2020 patient survey *Eczema Unmasked*, people said stress was the single biggest trigger of their eczema flare-ups, with significantly more women (57%) affected than men (41%). As well as contributing to inflammation throughout the body, stress hampers the skin's ability to repair. Crucially, it also sets off the vicious circle shown below:



## What is stress?

Stress is our natural response to feeling threatened or under pressure. When we encounter a difficult situation, our fight or flight response is triggered, priming our body for action. This response can be useful – enabling us to push through the pain of running a marathon or the fear of giving a speech – but prolonged exposure to stress can leave us feeling overwhelmed or drained.

## Is there a solution?

Everyone experiences stress – and each of us responds differently. The key to coping well is to focus on good stress management. This means prioritising the right tasks, delegating to others and being able to switch off from constantly worrying about what's coming next. Importantly, it also means making time to relax, have fun and practise self-care.

This is especially important when you are going through major life events, such as moving house, getting married, starting a new job or studying for exams. The stress can build up unnoticed over weeks and months. People often say that big events like these trigger more severe eczema flares-ups, which are then harder than usual to manage because they come on top of the existing stress.

For many of us, the hardest aspect is learning to prioritise our own needs ahead of the needs of others. But taking time for yourself isn't an indulgence – it's essential, to avoid burnout.

 **Top ten tips**

Staying on top of stress levels doesn't need to mean completely changing your life overnight. (In fact, trying to do that will only add to your stress levels!) Even small changes to your mindset and lifestyle can have a significant impact on the amount of stress you're under and your ability to cope with it.

**1 LEARN TO SAY NO** Lots of us are guilty of being people pleasers and saying 'yes' to everything. Before you do, pause and think. Do you really want to do this? Can you justify the time? If not, say 'No.' Another option is to say 'I'll think about it' – but if you will feel stressed about having to refuse later, it may be easier to say 'no' straight away.

**2 IDENTIFY YOUR TRIGGERS** Make a list of everything in your life that you find stressful and look for workarounds. If you dread the school run, could your partner take it on? If you've fallen out of love with your job, do you need to make time to polish your CV?

**3 STAY FOCUSED** 'To do' lists are great but if they include too many actions, they can leave you feeling overwhelmed. It removes the sense of achievement if every time you cross a job off there are still so many left. Focus on your top ten tasks to maintain momentum.

**4 LOSE THE BOOZE** It's tempting to use a nightly glass or two of wine to unwind after a stressful day, but it can easily become a crutch. Alcohol also has a negative impact on the quantity and quality of sleep, which can also trigger a flare up. Find another activity that helps you relax quickly – but is good for you in the longer term, too.

**5 GET OUTSIDE** There's a reason so many people turned to walking when the pandemic first started. Getting out into nature makes us feel healthier, better able to cope and improves our mood. Make time every day to head outdoors to get some fresh air and clear your mind.

**6 YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT** When you're feeling stressed, it's easy to skip meals or comfort eat. But what we eat directly affects our mental well being – and it's vital to eat healthy, nutritious meals to protect your skin and to help it to repair itself.

**7 ZZZZZZ...** Stress and poor sleep go hand in hand. See our guide to getting a good night's sleep in the March issue of *Exchange*.

**8 GET MOVING** Regular exercise not only lowers the body's stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol – it also stimulates the production of endorphins (our 'happy hormones').

**9 FIGHT BACK** Whenever your fight or flight response is triggered, counter it with relaxation. Take time out to practise whichever technique works best for you – yoga, mindfulness, meditation, breathing exercises or self-massage.

**10 A PROBLEM SHARED** Get into the habit of talking about how you're feeling with those around you, so that you have a support network. Other people can offer a different perspective, useful advice or simply a friendly, listening ear. If you feel you need additional support, reach out to your GP or a professional counsellor.

## Ways to relax in 15 minutes

**CATCH YOUR BREATH** Sit up straight in a chair with your feet on the floor and close your eyes. Breathe in long and deep and breathe out long and slow. Repeat ten times.

**FOCUS ON THE HERE AND NOW** When we're feeling stressed, our minds are constantly ten steps ahead. This simple mindfulness exercise gently brings us into the present moment:

- **Five things you can see**

Stop what you're doing, look around and closely observe five things in your environment – especially those you've never really paid attention to before.

- **Five things you can hear**

Next, listen intently to five different sounds. Notice how they ebb and flow and their pitch, tone or rhythm.

- **Five things you can feel**

Finally, notice the sensation of five different things on your skin.

**TAP INTO THE ISSUE** The Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) is an approach that involves tapping key acupuncture points. Some research indicates that it may help anxiety or pain though it is unclear how it works.

- Focus on the feeling or problem that you want to work on and put it into a short sentence. For example 'I feel completely overwhelmed with work.'
- Score the intensity of the feeling on a scale of 1 (mild) to 10 (severe).
- Tap the side of your hand – the part that would touch an object in a karate chop – and repeat three times: 'Even though I feel [whatever the feeling or problem is], I deeply and completely accept myself.'



- Focus on the problem, tapping each of the following points (on either side of the body:):
  - Top of the head
  - Inner end of eyebrow
  - Bone beside the outer corner of the eye
  - Under the eye
  - Under the nose
  - Chin (half way down)
  - Inner point of collarbone
  - Side of the body 10cm under the armpit
  - Top of the head
- Score the intensity again to assess any change. If needed, repeat.

Find out more at: <https://tinyurl.com/eftechnique>

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