

Eczema In Infancy And Early Childhood

(Written for "The Listener" by DR. H. B. TURBOTT, Director of the Division of School Hygiene, Health Department)

ECZEMA is by no means uncommon in infancy. If your baby has a rash which everybody tells you is eczema, and which won't heal up or keeps coming back, don't go on trying this or that ointment as may be recommended by your neighbour. Your chemist may supply different lotions and ointments after a doctor has diagnosed eczema, and yet that rash persists or returns. Perhaps the trouble is what is nowadays called "allergy"—undue sensitivity to things which ordinarily do not upset the human body. Your baby's rash appears, fades, reappears, because he is reacting to something such as house dust, pollens in the air, or foodstuffs.

Allergy comes out in the human body in many forms. There are several blood relations of eczema; for example, asthma, hay fever, and another skin condition called urticaria (in which large weals suddenly appear on the skin), are closely allied to eczema.

Whether the baby's rash is due to allergy or not is very easily found out. So if an eczema in a baby or small child hangs on in spite of various treatments, have him tested for sensitivity. The testing is simple. Either the arm or the leg is used. Babies under two years are given a series of little "scratches" on the legs, into which extracts of any possible or suspected cause are rubbed. If the baby is sensitive to any of the materials, red raised weals appear in a few minutes. Common foodstuffs, common materials which are breathed in, animals commonly in and around a house—these constitute the range for the commencing tests. If common things fail to give reactions, more unusual things are tested out before the quest for a particular sensitivity is ended.

In tests made recently in a children's hospital, many common things were implicated. Skin emanations and dusts were frequently at fault. Horse dander was commonest, then came house dust, followed by mixed feathers, kapok, cattle hair, cat, dog and rabbit fur. Certain types of face and body powder caused reactions—orris root was the trouble; orris-free baby powders gave no bother. The air-borne grass pollens, such as rye, cocksfoot, sorrel, dahlia, Iceland poppy, and so on, upset some children. Foodstuffs were frequently implicated—egg white upset most, next wheat (bread and wheatmeal), cow's milk, oatmeal, etc.

If a food is responsible, cut it out. If you can't eliminate it, substitute—for example, cow's milk can be replaced successfully by dried milk, or soya bean. An implicated dust can be avoided—mattress and pillow of sheep's wool instead of kapok. The risk from house dust may be removed by vacuum cleaning, and by putting the child to sleep outside; animal dust by eliminating the animal. If the casual thing can't be avoided, injections can be given to desensitise the patient. Remember these causes of eczema, and have them searched for!



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