

Suffering from flare-ups

Parents of babies and young children with eczema will try every possible way to manage their offspring's skin condition so they don't suffer from unbearable itch and painful rashes.

By TAN SHIOW CHIN
starhealth@thestar.com.my

THERE is a particular misery when, as a parent, you are helpless and can't seem to relieve your child's suffering.

It is particularly awful when the child is a baby or toddler who cannot understand or communicate why they are in pain, or why mummy and daddy have to do certain things that make them uncomfortable, but are meant to prevent their condition from getting worse.

Eczema, which is also known as atopic dermatitis, is a skin condition that presents as itchy, red rashes on the skin that bleed easily.

It is a chronic condition that can present in children as young as two to three months of age.

There is no known cause nor cure for this condition, although there are treatments to control the symptoms.

It is, however, believed to be linked to genetics, as it often occurs in children whose family has a history of atopic dermatitis and the related conditions of asthma and hay fever; and a misdirected immune response that leads to defects in the skin barrier.

The good news is that many children with atopic dermatitis will eventually outgrow the condition, although they may still be subjected to the occasional flare-up.

However, in the meantime, both parents and child can be in for a rough time.



(From left) Tan with her daughters, Queenie and Winnie, and her husband Engelbert Lai. The entire family follows an organic, gluten-free diet to help control Queenie's eczema. — Photos: SAMUEL ONG/The Star

Too much advice

For unit trust agent Tan Li Ling, her eldest child Queenie Lai's atopic dermatitis has meant that her entire family's diet is tailored to avoid triggers, ie food that could cause her daughter's eczema to flare up or worsen her symptoms.

Initially, Tan, 35, received all kinds of advice on what not to feed Queenie, which was frustrating.

"Don't eat chicken, don't eat fish, don't eat pork — then eat what?"

"Also cannot eat bread, cannot eat white rice, cannot eat mee — I also don't know what she can eat!" she recalls.

In the end, she decided that a gluten-free organic diet would be the most beneficial for Queenie, and the entire family would also follow suit. Children's favourites like ice cream, chocolates, sweets and cakes are excluded from their diet. So, Queenie gets a jelly cake, rather than the usual baked cake, for her birthday.

Despite a negative allergy test for eggs, Tan also prohibits Queenie from taking eggs.

"She actually went for the skin prick test (to determine what substances a person is allergic to) and it showed that she has no egg allergy.

"But, I found that when she eats eggs, her skin will develop rashes and become itchy," explains Tan, adding that although they have been asked to go for a more thorough allergy test, using blood, they haven't done so yet.

Queenie's strict diet means that Tan has to cook for her every day. Occasionally, she also prepares meals specially for her four-year-old daughter Winnie, who does not have eczema, when she wants to eat something her sister cannot.

"If I don't cook for her one day, I feel guilty, because I am making her go out and eat all those foods she should not be eating," shares Tan. "I feel stressed because I have to cook every day.

"And at night, we cannot sleep well because as parents, we are sensitive to our child with eczema as she will scratch and bleed while she is sleeping."

She says that because of this, Queenie's bedsheets usually have to be changed every two days.

All their cleaning products, like detergent and floor cleaner, are as chemical free as possible, and the entire house gets a thorough spring cleaning once every two to

three weeks.

Shares Tan: "Actually, we have to monitor our finances, because we have to spend quite a lot on her cream and her food. If you compare gluten-free and non-gluten free, and organic and non-organic foods, the price difference is quite a lot, so finance-wise, we have to be very careful."

In addition, Queenie is homeschooled as she was singled out and bullied due to her skin condition while in kindergarten and Year One in a public Chinese school.

Extreme diet

While 21-month-old Affan Taufiq is still too young to perceive any prejudice towards his rash-covered skin, his parents Hafifah Jamhari and Taufiq Baharudin are all too well aware of it.

"Even when we go out to buy groceries, people will look at us *macam geli sangat* (like it's revolting); it's very judgemental.

"Some will even pull their kids away from us. It was heartbreaking," shares Hafifah, tearing up as she remembers those days.

From just a rash behind his head when he was three months old, Affan's whole body was covered with itchy rashes by the time he was six months.

"The specialist said it was eczema and we had to use steroids," shares the engineer turned stay-at-home mum.

"We started with a lower class of steroids, and of course it worked wonders — after two or three applications, the redness would disappear — so we thought it was over.

"But when we tapered down the steroids, his eczema would come back, and it became worse than before."

It was especially difficult for Hafifah, 29, and Taufiq, 32, as they had been trying for a child for awhile.

"He was a happy baby — we didn't have much problems tackling his emotions back then, but we had really bad problems tackling our own emotions, because we had waited for a long time for a child, and then he was born and he had this issue," she shares.

Feeling the need for help and support, she

THE WORLD'S
No.1
BRAND OF
GINSENG
CheongKwanJang

GIVE THE LUXURY OF HEALTH THIS CHINESE NEW YEAR

LIMITED CNY PROMOTION

10 FREE SACHETS with every 30 EVERYTIME sachets purchased in-store

CheongKwanJang selects only 6-year-old ginseng roots which have a significantly high amount of health components.

Retailers:

Certified by: