



Battling **CHRONIC** SKIN CONDITIONS

Eczema, psoriasis and other chronic skin conditions are difficult to treat and, as **Sheree Mutton** discovers, they can take their toll on the whole family.

BATH TIME WAS always a struggle for Megan Cattanach. Armed with glow sticks and colouring dye, the Sunshine Coast mother would do anything she could to make the water appealing to her young son, Kobi, who has suffered from severe atopic dermatitis, or eczema, for most of his life. “It was always a big fight,” recalls Megan. “He would scream. It was like I was punishing him. The water stung him.”

Megan spent three years watching her son in agony, scratching his sore and

inflamed little body. “Kobi was about nine months old when we found out he had allergies and we noticed small patches in the creases of his arms and behind the knees,” she says. “In the beginning we thought it was to do with a food allergy.”

Within a year, Kobi’s eczema had worsened and Megan and her husband Jamie felt helpless. “He was hysterical with itching,” says Megan. “He used to say, ‘take the owwies off me, Mummy’. We tried everything – food elimination, we went to a naturopath, we alternated between steroid creams and nothing worked.”

Health
top tip

Seek advice from a professional: If you're suffering from eczema, psoriasis or another skin condition, see your doctor or dermatologist for a personalised management plan.

After months of appointments with dermatologists and countless creams, Kobi was categorised in the top 0.5 per cent of severe eczema sufferers and referred to the Royal Children's Hospital in Brisbane. A frustrated Megan was forced to pull Kobi out of family day care and started to work from home to care for him.

"It was physically and emotionally draining," she says. "The worse thing is having a child and feeling like you're doing everything you can to help but really nothing is helping."

According to dermatologist Professor Dedee Murrell, Australia has one of the highest incidences of eczema in the world. "About 15 per cent of the childhood population have eczema in Australia – then about three-quarters grow out of it, but they remain having

ECZEMA

THE CAUSES "In many cases it is a genetic weakness of the skin's barrier, along with environmental triggers and irritants, as well as the person's immune response to these," says dermatologist Professor Dedee Murrell.

TREATMENTS Professor Murrell says general measures are essential regardless of the other treatments that are being used by the patient. "Baths without soap/shampoo, but with non-fragranced inert bath oils for 10 minutes per day, followed by liberal amounts of a thick, bland, non-perfumed moisturisers are best," she says. "Moisturise all areas of the skin first and then apply specific treatments to the red, itchy areas." Dermatologists or your GP can prescribe steroid creams and immunosuppressive tablets for more severe cases.

'sensitive skin' so it can recur if triggered by irritants or allergens in adulthood," she says. "Our environment is very clean, dry and has many plant allergens."

Desperate for her son's condition to improve, Megan spent her evenings researching new treatments and solutions, and speaking to other parents with children suffering eczema via social media.

"I saw on *A Current Affair* the Avène Hydrotherapy Center in France as an option for eczema and thought we have to get him there. It was the last resort," says Megan. The centre, located in the south of France, is world-renowned for its thermal spring water which is medically proven to help with chronic skin conditions.

The biggest challenge and downside to the treatment, which requires 21-days of personalised treatments under the care of a dermatologist, is the cost. Megan says it cost her about \$20,000, including flights and accommodation. While other countries do provide rebates for the treatment, none are available here under Medicare or by private health insurers. Megan admits it's a huge deterrent for families who are not comfortable financially, but after seeing the results on children similar to Kobi, she wanted to give it a try.

Although thermal spring water spas are popular in Europe, not a lot is known about them here in Australia, even among medical professionals.

"I have visited the Avène Hydrotherapy Center whilst lecturing in Toulouse nearby and sent some of my patients there," says Professor Murrell. "It is a medical spa which focuses on patients with eczema and they are all referred there by dermatologists. They gain insight into how to take care of their dry and itchy skin from experts in a peaceful environment. They bathe in

the spa water twice daily for 20 minutes each time and drink the water, about one litre per day, and apply moisturisers containing the spring water. Over 100 papers have been published on series of patients whose objective eczema score reduced significantly in three weeks and was maintained at home using these >

PSORIASIS

THE CAUSES It's a condition affecting about 2 per cent of Australians, yet there's still a lot we don't know about psoriasis. "The exact cause of psoriasis is still not well understood," says dermatologist Dr Nicholas Stewart from The Skin Hospital. "However, the immune system appears to play a major role," he says. "Psoriasis is a disease which can affect the skin, scalp, nails and joints. It is equally common in men and women. Both children and adults can be affected, but the peak onset is seen in early adult life (15-25 years) and another in late middle-age (50-60 years)."

TREATMENTS Although there is no cure for psoriasis, there are many effective treatment options to control the disease in most patients. "It is not unusual to trial several therapies or combine therapies before the disease can be brought under control," says Dr Stewart. "It is important to pursue all treatments under medical supervision. When psoriasis affects small areas, topical therapies (creams and ointments) may be the best option. Moisturisers used alone or combined with topical corticosteroids can be very helpful," he adds. "Compounded topical preparations (i.e. those made up specifically by the pharmacist) allow a combination of ingredients tailored specifically for the affected area of skin."

products. Many of them return to the Avène spa the subsequent years.”

Kobi started immunosuppressants through Lady Cilento Children’s Hospital in Brisbane in 2014 and shortly after he and his family travelled to France for his first treatment, following a generous donation from local business owners. “It was very overwhelming travelling half way around the world in the hope of some relief,” says Megan. “His skin did get worse before it got better.”

Kobi, now four, recently returned to France for his second 21-day treatment in the past 12 months. His parents have noticed a considerable difference in his skin and behaviour. “He no longer wears his cotton gloves at night when he goes to bed and we have been able to take him off all medication to get him



BEFORE: Kobi was at times hysterical with the itching.



AFTER: Kobi is now a bubbly boy enjoying life.

to sleep at night,” says Megan. “His flare-ups are more manageable now and his skin has a faster healing time”.

Although Kobi likes to call Avène the “magic waters”, his mum is a little more reserved about labelling it a miracle cure. “It has never been presented to us a cure,” she says. “It’s a relief, not a cure. You still have to maintain the routine. When you get complacent, that’s when it can come back.”

Still, Megan is thankful that her son’s bubbly personality has returned. “He has always been a very social baby, but when he was going through all of this he was different. Eczema robbed him of half his life,” she says. “He can play on the

trampoline, he can swim in the pool, and we can go to the beach. We came back from France with a different boy.” #



The town of Avène in southern France.

AVÈNE’S “MAGIC WATERS”

IN THE SMALL town of Avène, in southern France, thermal spring water is used to treat burn scars and chronic diseases like eczema and psoriasis at a hydrotherapy centre. The healing properties of the water, which has a unique micro-flora, was discovered in 1736. Centuries later in 1975, the Pierre Fabre group, owned by French pharmacist Pierre Fabre, acquired the hydrotherapy centre, which had fallen into disuse. Today, it is flourishing. Still owned by Pierre Fabre, now a global company with an annual turnover of more than \$3.3 billion, it accommodates about 2800 patients a year. About 50 of those patients are Australian. The treatments range from spring water baths and showers to skin compresses. According to Marie-Ange Martincic, the director of the Avène Hydrotherapy Center, the treatments on offer will not help everyone. “We refuse to treat some people. We have thousands of requests every year. Only 25 per cent are successful,” she says. Marie-Ange is also upfront about the effectiveness on patients with chronic conditions such as eczema or psoriasis. “We can improve the disease for several months after treatment,” she says. “We are cautious about using the word cure because these are chronic diseases.”



The Avène Hydrotherapy Center.

TOPICAL TREATMENTS

Over-the-counter topical products can help with the management of minor skin allergies and flare-ups of eczema or psoriasis. “The key rationale for topical drug usage in these conditions is to relieve the symptoms, optimise skin hydration, suppress inflammation and prevent or eliminate infection,” says Pharmacist Regina Cowie from Priceline Pharmacy. “Topical agents are normally first line as they are accessible, can be used easily by many sufferers, generally affordable in price and can assist with management of the condition in most instances.”



- 1. Avène XeraCalm A.D. Cleansing Oil**, 400ml, \$41.95.
- 2. Bioderma Atoderm Intensive**, 200ml, \$32.99.
- 3. La Roche-Posay Lipikar Baume AP+**, 200ml, \$24.95.
- 4. Aveeno Dermexa Moisturising Cream**, 206g, \$19.99.
- 5. DermaVeen Sensitive Relief Eczema Lotion**, 250ml, \$14.99.
- 6. Novapel Eczema Cream**, 30g, \$24.99.