

Protecting babies from eczema with low-cost Vaseline

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Applying low-cost moisturizers to a baby's skin for the first six months of his or her life is a cost-effective way to prevent eczema. Credit: Northwestern University

What if it was possible to prevent your child from getting eczema—a costly, inflammatory skin disorder—just by applying something as inexpensive as petroleum jelly every day for the first six months of his or her life?

A Northwestern Medicine study published today (Dec. 5) in *JAMA Pediatrics* found that seven common moisturizers would be cost effective in preventing eczema in high-risk newborns. By using the cheapest moisturizer in the study ([petroleum jelly](#)), the cost benefit for prophylactic moisturization was only \$353 per quality-adjusted life year - a generic measure of disease burden that assesses the monetary value of medical interventions in one's life.

Eczema impacts as many as 20 percent of children and costs the U.S. healthcare system as much as \$3.8 billion dollars every year. Previous studies have shown that families caring for a child with the costly skin disorder can spend as much as 35 percent of their discretionary income - an average of \$274 per month.

"It's not only terrible for the kids, but also for their families," said lead and corresponding study author Dr. Steve Xu, a resident physician in dermatology at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. "Eczema can be devastating. Beyond the intractable itch, a higher risk of infections and sleep problems, a child with eczema means missed time from school, missed time from work for parents and huge out-of-pocket expenses. So if we can prevent that with a cheap moisturizer, we should be doing it."

Early studies from Japan, the U.S. and the U.K. have suggested that full-body application of moisturizers for six to eight months, beginning within the first few weeks of life, can reduce the risk that eczema will develop. Xu's study took that one step further and examined the cost-effectiveness of seven common, over-the-counter moisturizer products, such as petroleum jelly, Aquaphor, Cetaphil and Aveeno.

"There's an important economic argument to be made here," Xu said. "Moisturizers are an important intervention dermatologists use to treat eczema. They play a big role in getting our patients better. But insurers do not usually cover the cost of moisturizers. We're arguing for their inclusion in health insurance coverage."

Xu acknowledges the evidence is preliminary on prophylactic moisturization but said, "We're not giving them an oral drug or injecting them with a medication; there is minimal risk. We're putting Vaseline on these babies to potentially prevent a very devastating disease."

In addition to preventing [eczema](#), Xu cites emerging work that preserving the skin barrier may also reduce the risk of other health problems like food allergies. He notes that larger, long-term clinical studies are underway to see if prophylactic moisturizing leads to sustained benefits.

Provided by Northwestern University

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