In utero chemical exposure leads to eczema, study funds

New study finds that exposure to a certain household chemical in utero increases a baby's risk of developing eczema.

Eczema is a particularly irksome condition that affects millions of babies each year. Also known as atopic dermatitis, eczema is characterized by red, itchy rashes that sometimes swell, and almost always are accompanied by dry skin. No one knows for sure what causes the outbreaks, although health experts have long suspected a link between eczema and allergies.

A new study from researchers at the Columbia Center for Children's Environmental Health in New York appears to confirm this theory. The study found a link between prenatal exposure to a certain household chemical and a baby's risk of developing eczema.

The chemical in question, called butylbenzyl phthalate, or BBzP, is found in many common household products including vinyl flooring, PVC piping, artificial leather and other household materials. The study, which was published in the online edition of Environmental Health Perspectives, found that women with the highest levels of BBzP in their urine during pregnancy had babies who were 52 percent more likely to develop eczema than women with lower exposure levels.

What's really scary is that the women in this study had no special exposure scenarios going on. They weren't moving, or painting their homes, or buying new furniture. According to researchers, these chemicals are everywhere, found in many common consumer products. In fact, the researchers found them in the urine of more than 99 percent of the women surveyed.