Stress can cause or contribute to an astonishing variety of skin problems. Some of these conditions are caused by biochemical and hormonal disruptions. While a specific diagnosis of your particular condition is impossible without a physical examination, what you're describing sounds a lot like neurodermatitis, a stress-related condition triggered in the central nervous system. Neurodermatitis winds up causing abnormal growth in the nerve fibers close to the skin, sometimes creating small, hard and very itchy bumps known as prurigo nodularis. This results in a maddening scratch-itch cycle: Scratching the bumps induces more growth and more itching. This chronic condition can be difficult to resolve, but at our clinic, we've had good luck with a combination of prescription topical treatments and a special type of phototherapy. This method, in which the skin is exposed to gentle, narrow-band wavelengths of ultraviolet light, helps moderate immune-system activity and is useful for many types of psoriasis and eczema. Additionally, in some cases we've referred patients for psychological counseling to help them reduce and manage their stress, which, if left untreated, can negatively affect recovery and cause other health problems. I would recommend that you see a board-certified dermatologist about your condition as soon as possible. Nonprescription itch treatments are unlikely to help and can make matters worse.

The condition you are describing sounds like dyshidrotic eczema, which is common among stressed-out youth and adults, often on a seasonal basis. Scratching can worsen the discomfort and lead to skin thickening, so first off, encourage your daughter to resist the temptation to scratch. She should also avoid overwashing or picking at her hands. Second, arrange a visit with a dermatologist. Depending on the severity of the condition, he or she will probably prescribe a topical ointment, phototherapy and, if an infection is present, oral antibiotics. Some combination of these therapies will be effective in treating the eczema. Finally, encourage your daughter to pursue some stress-reducing activities like yoga or meditation. Helping her to better manage her academic anxiety could help prevent future outbreaks.

Charles E. Crutchfield III, MD, is a nationally recognized board-certified dermatologist, a Diplomate of the American Board of Dermatology and a Fellow of the American Academy of Dermatology. Dr. Crutchfield is also a clinical associate professor of dermatology at the University of Minnesota Medical School and the medical director of Crutchfield Dermatology in Eagan, Minn. (www.crutchfielddermatology.com).