

Treating and preventing hand eczema (hand dermatitis)

Department of Dermatology

Information for Patients

Produced: May 2022

Updated: October 2023

Review: May 2025

Leaflet number: 1294 Version: 1.1

Hand eczema is also called hand dermatitis. It is common and can affect about 1 in every 20 people. If not treated it can last for many years and so have a great impact on daily life. It can be triggered or made worse by direct skin contact with many different substances usually known as irritants.

Important tips to help your hands

Here are 4 important tips to speed healing and stop a flare-up of your hand dermatitis.

1. Use gloves to protect your hands

- If gloves are to be used for washing dishes and clothes they should be **plastic or PVC** and not rubber since rubber can cause dermatitis. Gloves should not be worn for more than 15 to 20 minutes at a time. If water enters a glove, take the glove off immediately. Turn the gloves inside out and rinse them under hot water tap several times a week and then allow them to dry completely.
- **Cotton gloves** can be used under plastic ones to soak up sweat that would otherwise irritate your skin. They should only be worn a few times before they are washed.
- Buy several pairs of plastic and cotton gloves at a time for use in the kitchen, the bathroom and at work.
- Beware of contaminating the insides of gloves with chemicals and soaps. If gloves become contaminated, rinse out immediately and leave to dry inside out. If gloves develop a hole discard immediately. Wearing a glove with a hole is worse than no gloves at all.
- Wear cotton gloves for housework. Wash them in the washing machine regularly.
- Use heavy duty fabric gloves when doing any gardening, DIY and outdoor work.

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- Wear gloves when outdoors in cold weather to prevent your hands drying, cracking and chapping.

2. Use soap substitutes

- Normal soaps, detergents and hand washes can be very irritating to your hands and should be avoided.
- When washing your hands use lukewarm water and a soap free cleanser such as Dermol 500 lotion as recommended by your health carer provider. These soap substitutes should be fragrance free. They are also excellent moisturisers and form a protective layer over the skin. Dry carefully with a clean towel, not forgetting to dry between the fingers.
- **Do not** use Dermol neat as a moisturiser. Only use with water to wash the skin
- Have several tubs of these soap substitutes both at home and at work, one next to each sink. Smaller tubs to carry around with you are also a good idea.
- Use a bland, fragrance-free moisturiser as well. They are safe to apply to all areas of the skin, even on children. They should be used whenever your skin feels dry or itchy.

3. Avoid irritants

- Avoid direct skin contact with detergents and other cleansing agents. These are all irritants. Measure out washing powder and detergents carefully using only the amount recommended on the packaging. Keep the outside of the packaging free of spillage to avoid direct contact with the detergents and cleansing agents.
- Skin cleansers used at work are also harsh on the hands and best avoided. Use a soap free cleanser substitute instead.
- For washing up, use running water if possible.
- Rings should not be worn during housework or other work, even when the dermatitis has healed. Rings should be cleaned on the inside frequently with a brush then rinsed thoroughly. Never wash your hands with soap when wearing a ring..
- Washing machines and dishwashers are the ideal way of protecting your hands from irritants.
- Avoid direct contact with shampoo is possible. Let somebody else shampoo your hair or use plastic or PVC gloves.
- Avoid direct contact with polishes including metal, wax, shoe, floor, car, furniture and window polishes.
- Avoid direct contact with harsh chemicals such as white spirit, petrol, turpentine and thinners.
- Do not peel or squeeze oranges, lemons, grapefruit, garlic, chillies, potatoes or tomatoes with bare hands. These are safe to eat without any problems
- Could another family member do these jobs for you?

4. Keep going

It takes time for your skin to recover from dermatitis. Do not forget that the skin will remain vulnerable for at least 6 months after the dermatitis appears to be completely healed, so continue to follow the above instructions.

Triggers for hand dermatitis

Items that can make hand dermatitis worse include

- Bar soaps
- Liquid soaps
- Handwashes
- Hand cleansers
- Shampoos
- Wet wipes
- Detergents
- Washing powders
- Fabric softeners
- Floor and surface cleaners
- Oils, greases and coolants
- Fragrances and perfumes
- White spirit, petrol, trichloroethylene, turpentine and thinners.
- Garden products including soil, compost, plant foods and fertilisers
- Dog and pet shampoos and cleaners
- Oranges, lemons, grapefruit, garlic, chillies, potatoes or tomatoes. (These are all safe to eat without any problems)

Recommended moisturisers (emollients)

These moisturisers are all recommended by dermatologists. Emollients form a barrier layer to soothe and hydrate the skin. They must be low in preservatives, hypoallergenic, fragrance free and colour free so always check the ingredients. Try out several such as those below to find the one best suited for your skin. They can be prescribed or bought over the counter or online.



Creams for use at work and at home:

Zerobase cream

Cetraben cream

Epimax cream

Epaderm cream

Hydromol cream

Thick ointments for very dry or damaged skin are especially useful at night:

Hydromol ointment

Epaderm ointment

Diprobase ointment

White Soft Paraffin 50% & Liquid Paraffin 50% Ointment

Emollin spray

More information

British Association of Dermatologists

www.bad.org.uk/patient-information-leaflets/hand-dermatitis

Contact details

If you need further advice show this leaflet to your pharmacist, nurse or GP.

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Previous reference:

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