

Treating and preventing hand eczema (hand dermatitis)

Department of Dermatology

Information for Patients

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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

- Use plastic or PVC gloves when washing dishes and clothes. Do not use rubber gloves as it can cause dermatitis.
- Only wear gloves for 15 to 20 minutes at a time.
- If water enters a glove, take the glove off right away.
- When washing the gloves, turn the gloves inside out and rinse them under hot water from the tap. Let them dry completely before using them again.
- Wear cotton gloves under plastic ones to soak up sweat that could irritate your skin. Cotton gloves can only be worn a few times before they need to be washed.
- Wear cotton gloves for housework. Wash them in the washing machine often.
- Buy several pairs of plastic and cotton gloves at a time for use in the kitchen, the bathroom and at work.
- Do not get chemicals and soaps inside the gloves. If gloves become contaminated, rinse out right away and leave to dry inside out.

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- If your gloves have a hole, throw them away. Wearing a glove with a hole is worse than no gloves at all.
- Use heavy duty fabric gloves when doing any gardening, DIY and outdoor work.
- Wear gloves when outdoors in cold weather to stop your hands drying, cracking and chapping.

2. Use soap substitutes

- Avoid normal soaps, detergents and hand washes. They can be very irritating to your hands.
- When washing your hands use lukewarm water and a soap free cleanser such as Dermol 500 lotion. Use what is recommended by your health carer provider. These soap substitutes should be fragrance free. They are also excellent moisturisers and create a protective layer over the skin. Dry carefully with a clean towel. Make sure to dry between the fingers.
- **Do not** use Dermol 500 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 tubes 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 will irritate your skin.
- Measure out washing powder and detergents carefully using only the amount recommended on the packaging. Keep the outside of the packaging free of spillage. This will help you to not make direct contact with the detergents and cleansing agents.
- Soap 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.
- Do not wear rings whilst doing housework or other work, even when the dermatitis has healed. You should clean the rings on the inside often with a brush then rinse thoroughly. Never wash your hands with soap when wearing a ring.
- Washing machines and dishwashers are the best 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 when shampooing.
- 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 this for you?

4. Keep going

It takes time for your skin to recover from dermatitis. Your skin will be vulnerable for at least 6 months after the dermatitis appears to be completely healed. Make sure 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)

The following moisturisers are all recommended by dermatologists. Emollients are moisturisers that create 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 different ones listen 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
- 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 more advice show this leaflet to your pharmacist, nurse or GP.

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