

Department of Dermatology, Churchill Hospital

Protection for hand eczema

Information for patients



What can I do to help my hand eczema?

Hand eczema (the same as hand dermatitis) is normally caused by a combination of factors. This includes having a sensitive skin, or an irritation or allergy to things we touch. Anyone can develop hand eczema with sufficient exposure to wet work and irritants. People with “sensitive skin” can develop hand eczema with little exposure, others will only develop problems after much greater exposure to these conditions. Those who have had eczema in the past or have a tendency to asthma or hay fever are particularly at risk.

Skin protection is a very important aspect of your treatment. This leaflet will give you information on how to protect your skin, how to help your skin recover and how to reduce the likelihood of further problems in the future.

What are irritants?

We are all exposed to irritants every day. Examples of irritants include repeated wetting of the skin, soaps, detergents, bleaches, disinfectants, shampoos, polishes, adhesives and solvents. Some foods and vegetable juices can also irritate the skin so it can be very difficult to completely protect sensitive skin.

How should I wash my hands?

When washing your hands use a very mild fragrance-free soap and tepid (slightly warm) water. Wet your hands before applying soaps. Use only a small amount of soap as even “mild” products are irritating to sensitive skin. Take your rings off before washing as soap can get trapped under them. A soap substitute such as aqueous cream or emulsifying ointment is better if the skin is very sensitive. Make sure that you rinse your hands thoroughly if you use soap and carefully dry your skin after washing. Pay particular attention to drying between the fingers. Always apply a moisturiser or fragrance-free hand cream afterwards.

How can I avoid contact with cleaning agents and detergents?

Many substances around the home and in the workplace are irritating to skin – such as soaps and detergents (e.g. washing up liquid).

- Always use gloves for washing up or persuade someone else to wash the dishes.
- If you have **young children or a baby**, avoid contact with sterilising solutions and use disposable nappies for your child. Wear gloves when bathing your child or washing their hair.
- Beware **polishes** of all types as they contain solvents and other irritants which can badly aggravate your skin. Solvents are also found in many other household products, e.g. white spirit, nail polish remover, paint thinners and dry cleaning fluids.
- Protect your hands when washing your hair by using gloves (see below) as **shampoos** contain a large amount of detergent.
- Always wear gloves when **hand washing clothes** as washing powders will always aggravate your skin.

Do I need to take any special precautions for food preparation?

Some foods are irritating to the skin when handled and ideally gloves should be worn when preparing them. Potatoes, onions, garlic and tomatoes can irritate the skin. The peel and juices of oranges, lemons and other citrus fruits are especially irritating. Some people can have problems with making pastry and preparing raw meat and fish.

Which gloves should I wear and when?

Protect your skin at home from direct contact with soaps, detergents and bleaches by wearing gloves, either disposable or reusable. Vinyl gloves or “hypoallergenic gloves” are better than normal rubber gloves, as you may become allergic to rubber. Buy a number of pairs so that you can have them easily available in different areas where wet and dirty work are performed. If they become punctured (develop a hole), immediately replace them; a punctured glove is worse than no glove at all. Thin vinyl disposable gloves are the best gloves for food preparation.

Buy a few pairs of cotton gloves for home use. Wear these for dry work and, if you wish, as a liner to your other gloves. Cotton gloves are also useful to wear after you have applied a thick layer of moisturiser (emollient). This will allow thorough moistening of your skin while keeping your furniture, books etc. free from mess.

If you need to wear gloves at work, your employer has a responsibility to make sure that the correct type of glove is provided for the task. Try to avoid wearing gloves for very long periods. During cold or windy weather wear gloves when out of doors to prevent your skin from drying and chapping.

Moisturisers

Use a good moisturising cream after hand washing and as frequently as possible (minimum 4 times daily). Avoid perfumed moisturisers, as perfume (fragrance) allergy is common. Also, if your dermatologist has advised you of any other allergies as a result of skin tests, avoid these substances too.

Health workers

If you work in the hospital or community then repeated hand washing and prolonged wearing of gloves may be a particular problem for you. Regularly moisturise your hands after washing and before and after work. Moisturise your hands regularly at work with Dermol 500 or another moisturiser, e.g. Cetraben or Diprobase. Your manager should be able to provide this for you. Use a greasier emollient after your shift and at home, e.g. Hydromol, Epaderm or emulsifying ointment. If you have dry skin or dermatitis of the hands, avoid the liquid soaps provided on the wards and use Dermol 500 as a soap substitute instead. Dermol 500 contains antiseptics with antibacterial properties active against a wide spectrum of bacteria including Methicillin resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA).

Use the alcohol hand rubs instead of full hand washing for infection control purposes as much as possible. However, in the event of stinging and discomfort, use Dermol 500 as a soap substitute.

Bear in mind that alcohol gel cannot be used when caring for patients with *Clostridium difficile* or diarrhoea of unknown origin or where hands appear visibly soiled.

How long should I continue these measures?

Continue all of these protection measures for at least four months after your dermatitis has settled. Your skin will remain sensitive to irritation for a long time after it appears to have fully healed.

Further information

For work related skin disorders <http://www.hse.gov.uk/skin/employ/whatare.htm>

For information on hand dermatitis for health workers
<http://www.nhsplus.nhs.uk/providers/clinicaleffectiveness-guidelines-evidencebased.asp>

For general information
<http://dermnetnz.org/doctors/dermatitis/hand.html>

If you need an interpreter or need a document in another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01865 221473**. When we receive your call we may transfer you to an interpreter. This can take some time, so please be patient.

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