

# Contact dermatitis

## What is contact dermatitis?

It is a skin inflammation caused by an allergic or irritating reaction to certain substances coming into contact with the skin. The reaction can be *acute* (sudden), within minutes to hours, or *chronic*, which comes on slowly (such as the reaction to the nickel in a watchband).

## What are the symptoms?

- redness of the skin
- itchiness
- bright red weeping areas or blisters (if severe)

The dermatitis can actually range from a faint redness to 'watermelon' swelling of the face.

## What areas are usually affected?

- the face, especially around the eyes
- the genital area
- the hands and feet

## What substances commonly cause dermatitis?

### Irritants

- acids and alkalis
- detergents or soaps
- sprays
- solvents or oils

### Allergens

- plants (e.g. rhus, grevillea, primula, poison ivy, mango skin, parsnips)
- chemicals in some perfumes and cosmetics
- some metals in jewellery, especially nickel (e.g. nickel buttons or studs); chromate (in cement and leather)
- rubber and latex
- some topical medications (e.g. antibiotics, anaesthetics, antihistamines)
- resins and glue
- dyes
- coral

## What is occupational dermatitis?

*Occupational dermatitis* is a very common form of contact dermatitis. It is caused by a whole range of irritants and

allergens used in industry that come into contact with the skin of workers. Most problems occur on the hands.

## What is housewife's dermatitis?

This is a common form of dermatitis on the hands of women (and men) who regularly use detergents, washing-up liquids and various household cleaners, especially with hot water. The skin becomes red, sore, dry and rough, especially over the knuckles. It may itch and crack, leading to extreme soreness.

## What is the treatment?

The obvious thing to do is work out the cause and remove it or avoid it if possible.

### Prevention

Always try to avoid the cause: an example is to get someone to remove any offending plants from the garden. Cut down the use of irritating substances such as solvents, soap, detergents, paint and thinners, scouring powder and pads, turpentine, and various polishes. A barrier cream can be rubbed into the hands before work.

For dermatitis of the hands, wear protective work gloves such as cotton-lined PVC gloves.

For housewife's dermatitis wear rubber gloves (if not sensitive to rubber) or other gloves for washing and peeling or squeezing fruit. Do not use any gloves that develop holes. Use soap substitutes such as Cetaphil lotion or Dove soap and pat dry the hands thoroughly after washing them. Use a dishwasher where possible if dishwashing is a problem.

### Self-help

For hand problems, rub in a prescribed cream, ointment or lotion and any moisturiser that helps such as sorbolene with 10% glycerol or Nutraplus.

### Medical help

Your doctor may prescribe a stronger anti-inflammatory cream or ointment such as hydrocortisone if the rash is severe or slow to heal. Sometimes anti-allergy tablets are prescribed. It is common to use patch testing, where suspected substances are applied to the skin to find the exact cause. If the patch test is positive, you should avoid the particular substance.