

## CONTACT DERMATITIS

*Contact dermatitis is a skin inflammation (especially of the hands, feet and groin) caused by contact with an irritating substance. Contact dermatitis is not contagious.*

### Frequent Signs and Symptoms

- Itching (sometimes)
- Slight redness.
- Cracks and fissures in the skin
- Bright red, weeping areas (severe cases).

### Causes

- Contact with irritants, such as sprays, acids or solvents. The irritant removes the fatty layer of skin. This causes dehydration and shrinking of surface cells.
- Some metals in jewelry.
- Poison ivy.
- Certain topical medications.
- Chemicals in some cosmetics.

### Risk Increases with:

- Constant exposure to hot water, detergents or any irritant that changes the moisture content of skin.
- Burns from hot water or sunburn.
- Occupations or hobbies that bring you in contact with irritants.

### Preventive Measures

- Avoid contact with any irritant that has caused dermatitis in the past. Wearing protective gloves may be helpful.
- Protect skin from sunburn and other burns.

### Expected Outcomes

Symptoms can be controlled with treatment and avoidance of the irritant. Recurrence is common, so treatment may be necessary for years.

### Possible Complications

- Secondary bacterial infection.
- More generalized skin eruption.

### Treatment

#### General Measures

- Diagnosis is usually made by physical findings
- Effective treatment involves eliminating allergens, avoiding irritants and other precipitating factors and relieving itching and inflammation.
- Avoid the chemical or material causing the skin eruption.
- Use bath oil or glycerin-based soap instead of soap for bathing. Wash only areas of known need (i.e., axillary, groin, feet) and water for rest.
- Pat skin dry rather than rubbing it.
- Reduce water temperature to lukewarm for bathing or other uses.

- Use only cream, lotion or ointment prescribed for the condition. Other commercial products may aggravate the condition. Apply ointment or cream to hands 6 or 7 times a day. For other body parts, lubricate twice a day, especially after bathing and apply when skin is still wet.
- Minimize the use of solvents, and wear heavy-duty, cotton-lined, vinyl gloves to prevent contact with irritating substances such as water, soap, detergent, metal scouring pads, scouring powder, paint, paint thinner, turpentine, and polish for cars, floors, shoes, furniture or metal.
- Dry the insides of gloves after use. Discard gloves if they develop a hole.
- Wear gloves when you peel or squeeze lemons, oranges, grapefruit, tomatoes or potatoes.
- Wear leather or heavy-duty fabric gloves for housework or gardening.
- Use a dishwasher (if available) to wash dishes or ask someone else to do it.
- Remove rings before doing housework or washing hands.
- Do not use fabric softeners in wash or anti-static sheets in dryer.

### **Medications**

Topical creams, ointments or lotions may be recommended. These may include steroid preparations to reduce inflammation or lubricants to preserve moisture.

Antihistamines will help control itch, but may cause sedation. For severe cases, oral steroids may be prescribed.

### **Activity**

Resume your normal activities gradually as irritation subsides.

### **Diet**

No special diet.

### **Please Read:**

If you develop any of the following symptoms, call the UHS advice nurse at 863-4463 or consult your personal clinician.

- You develop a fever.
- Signs of infection (swelling, tenderness, redness, warmth) develop at the site of irritation.
- Treatment does not relieve symptoms in one week.

### **Test Results and Advice Nurse**

Please call the nurse for test results and advice: 863-4463

### **Appointments**

Appointments can be made in person or by phone. If you are unable to keep your appointment, please call and cancel. Otherwise you will be charged for the visit.

To schedule or cancel appointments, call: 863-0774

**For more information about health care issues, visit the UHS Web site at [www.sa.psu.edu/uhs](http://www.sa.psu.edu/uhs)**

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

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