

Department of Dermatology  
**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 sensitive skin, or an irritation or allergy to things that you might touch. Anyone can develop hand eczema, and it often develops if your hands have been wet for long periods of time or they have come into contact with an irritant. People with 'sensitive skin' can develop hand eczema with very little exposure, others will only develop problems after much greater exposure to these conditions. If you have had eczema in the past, or have asthma or hay fever, you are more likely to develop hand eczema.

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 risk 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 (glues) 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 the soap. Use only a small amount of soap as even 'mild' products are still irritating to sensitive skin. Take your rings off before washing as soap can get trapped under them.

If your skin is very sensitive you can use a soap substitute to wash your hands, such as Dermol 500 or emulsifying ointment.

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 your 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 (see next page) when 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, 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 when preparing food?

Some foods are irritating to the skin when handled, so it is best to wear gloves 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 also have problems with making pastry and preparing raw meat and fish.

## Which gloves should I wear and when?

Protect your skin 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 the rubber. Buy a number of pairs, so that you can have them easily available in different areas where you carry out wet and dirty work. If they become punctured (develop a hole), immediately replace them; a punctured glove is worse than no glove at all, as it can trap potential allergens and irritants between the glove and your skin. Thin vinyl disposable gloves are the best gloves for food preparation.

Buy a few pairs of cotton gloves for dry work and, if you wish, as a liner for your other gloves. Cotton gloves are also useful to wear after you have applied a thick layer of moisturiser (emollient). This will allow your skin to be thoroughly moisturised, 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 of time.

During cold or windy weather, make sure you wear gloves when out doors to prevent your skin from drying and chapping.

## Moisturisers

Use a good moisturising cream after hand washing and as frequently as possible (a minimum of 4 times a day). Avoid perfumed moisturisers, as perfume (fragrance) allergy is common. Also, if your dermatologist has advised you of any other allergies they have identified 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, if these cause stinging and discomfort, wash your hands using Dermol 500 as a soap substitute instead.

Bear in mind that alcohol gel cannot be used when caring for patients with *Clostridium difficile* or diarrhoea of unknown origin or if your hands are visibly dirty.

## How long should I continue to follow these instructions?

Continue all of these protective measures for at least four months after your eczema 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:

Website: **[www.hse.gov.uk/skin](http://www.hse.gov.uk/skin)**

For information on hand dermatitis for health workers:

Website: **[www.nhshealthatwork.co.uk/dermatitis.asp](http://www.nhshealthatwork.co.uk/dermatitis.asp)**

For general information:

Website: **<http://dermnetnz.org/doctors/dermatitis/hand.html>**

Contact number for the Dermatology Outpatient Department:

Tel: **01865 228 283**

(9.00am to 5.00pm, Monday to Friday)



If you have a specific requirement, need an interpreter, a document in Easy Read, another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01865 221 473** or email **[PALSJR@ouh.nhs.uk](mailto:PALSJR@ouh.nhs.uk)**

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