

Occupational contact dermatitis: looking after your hands

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Once you have developed occupational contact dermatitis, it will take at least four months after your hands look better for them to become normal in their ability to resist damage. Your future is in your hands! Treatment is a four-step process.

1. Avoid irritants at home and at work.

Irritants are substances that remove moisture and natural oils from the skin, causing it to dry out. Repeated wetting and drying is very irritating for the hands. In some situations, using waterless hand cleansers may allow you to minimise contact with water. You should wear appropriate gloves for your work and household duties. Wear gloves for dishwashing, with cotton gloves underneath to reduce heat and sweating. Wear cotton gloves when doing housework, so you do not need to wash your hands as often. Wear vinyl gloves when working with food.

2. Use soap substitutes at home and at work.

These include emulsifying ointments and moisturising creams and lotions. Avoid harsh and abrasive hand cleansers. Applying a barrier cream before working may make it easier to wash some substances off the skin. Dry your hands thoroughly, especially under rings, preferably using a soft cotton towel (rather than a harsh paper towel), or an air drier if there is one available.

3. Moisturise as frequently as possible.

A moisturising lotion in a pump pack is convenient to use for quick applications after hand washing at home and at work, but use a greasy cream or ointment before bed. Keep several tubes or jars of moisturiser around the house: in the kitchen and bathroom, and by your bed. If your hands are still dry, wear a thin pair of cotton gloves to bed. If your cuticles are absent or damaged, use petroleum jelly to seal the gap at the base of your nails before washing your hands and showering.

4. Use corticosteroid ointment prescribed by your doctor on areas of red and itchy skin.

Corticosteroid ointments are best used at night, so they do not get washed off. Treat inflamed areas of skin early to stop them from getting worse. Stop using corticosteroid ointments once the skin has healed, but continue with steps 1 to 3 above.

This handout outlines the steps in treating contact dermatitis affecting your hands.



PHOTOLIBRARY



The characteristic redness, swelling, dryness and scaling of contact dermatitis. The affected area is usually itchy.



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