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Hand Dermatitis

What is hand dermatitis?

Hand dermatitis is a rash that occurs on the hands that usually develops as red, dry and scaly hands. Sometimes the hands develop cracks and become painful or little blisters or spots that itch.

What causes hand dermatitis?

Hand rashes are very common and may be caused by medical disease such as psoriasis and eczema or by external factors such as overexposure to water, soaps, cleaning agents, chemicals, rubber gloves, or even ingredients in skin and personal care products. Once the skin on the hands becomes chapped, even mild soap and water or skin creams can irritate the rash, making it worse. Some patients develop an allergy to certain things that can cause or worsen hand dermatitis, such as a reaction to Neosporin or vitamin E containing hand creams. It's very important to try to find out what might be coming in contact with your hands and causing or making your skin rash worse. Often your skin will get better by changing products or avoiding particular ingredients completely. Stress may be contributing to hand dermatitis, particularly when it causes you to rub, wring, scratch or wash your hands frequently. Sometimes we will do "patch testing" to help determine if a particular chemical might be causing an allergic or irritant skin reaction. This usually involves testing the skin on your back to see what specific ingredients might be causing your skin to react.

How is hand dermatitis treated?

1) Avoid things that may worsen the rash

Patients with hand dermatitis should avoid things that may be worsening the hand rash such as over washing or exposure to irritating substances. If the type of work you do is affecting your hands, talk to your supervisor about ways that you might be able to better protect your skin.

2) Protect your hands with gloves

Wearing vinyl gloves for protection against soaps, cleansers and other chemicals that can worsen your hands. Have four or five pair and keep them in the kitchen, bathroom, nursery and laundry areas. Have other pairs for non-wet housework and gardening. Avoid rubber gloves since many people are sensitive to them. Always replace any gloves that develop holes. Dry gloves out between cleaning jobs. When outdoors in cool weather, wear gloves/mittens to protect against dry and chapped skin. Keep hands warm in colder weather (see #7 below)

3) Avoid exposing your hands to water

Use an automatic dishwasher if possible, and avoid hand washing dishes or clothes as much as you can. When you wash your hands, use lukewarm water and very little soap.

4) Use a hand cream often

Maintain moisture in your hands by applying a hand cream after each time you wash your hands. Keep hand moisturizers near the sinks where you wash your hands.

5) Use medicated hand cream as needed

A soothing ointment or cream may be prescribed, and usually this should be used alone (in place of hand creams) as the more things you put on your hands the more likely you are to be exposed to a chemical ingredient that may actually make things worse. Hand rashes sometimes temporarily look or feel worse when treatment is first started as some of the medicated creams can actually cause a stinging sensation that will usually go away in a few days as the hands begin to heal. Once treatment is stopped the hand dermatitis oftentimes will come back. Since many hand rashes can be stubborn, it's important to keep up with your medication, stay in contact with your doctor, and not get discouraged.

6) Use anti-itch medications if needed.

Over-the-counter anti-itch pills such as diphenhydramine can help itching but beware of drowsiness.

7) Dress warmly in cooler weather to keep your core temperature high (layered clothing and warm hat).

If your core temperature falls, the body responds by cutting off circulation to the hands and feet. Cold hands mean less blood nourishment that leads to skin breakdown.

