

Contact Dermatitis

What is contact dermatitis?

Contact dermatitis is an inflammation of the skin that happens when it is touched by an irritating substance. The rash is usually just in the area of skin that touched the substance.

How does it occur?

Contact dermatitis occurs when the skin touches a substance that irritates the skin or causes an allergic reaction. Common causes of contact dermatitis from irritants are soaps, detergents, solvents, waxes, polishes, and hand cleaners. Common causes from allergic reactions are hair dyes, jewelry, fingernail polish, and deodorants. Some of the other substances that might cause contact dermatitis are rubber, poison ivy, and nickel. (Nickel is often in inexpensive jewelry, belt buckles, and the backs of watches.)

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of contact dermatitis include:

- itching
- swelling
- redness of the skin
- scaling of the skin
- blisters that may break open and ooze, crust, or scale, possibly causing an infection.

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about possible irritants that may have touched your skin recently. He or she will look at the entire rash, noting where it is and how it looks in each area (for example, whether it is on one or both hands).

How is it treated?

Your healthcare provider may prescribe:

- cream or ointment to stop the itching and other symptoms
- antihistamine pills to help stop itching and any allergic reaction
- anti-inflammatory medicine, such as prednisone, if your rash is severe.

You will need to try to avoid the substance that irritated your skin.

How long will the effects last?

With treatment, the rash should get better in a few days.

How can I take care of myself?

Follow your healthcare provider's instructions. In addition, you can:

- Avoid further irritating the area of skin where you have contact dermatitis. For example, do not scratch the skin or put cosmetics on the area.
- Put cool, moist cloths on the areas of skin with dermatitis.
- Avoid further contact with the substance that appears to cause the dermatitis.

How can I help prevent contact dermatitis?

If you know the substance that caused the dermatitis, make sure that the substance is not one of the ingredients in the cosmetic, cleaning, or other products that you use. If you are accidentally exposed to the substance, wash the exposed area right away. Wash thoroughly but gently to try to remove as much of the substance as possible without further irritating the skin.

Whether or not you know what substances give you contact dermatitis, it may be helpful to:

- Learn to recognize poison oak, poison ivy, and ragweed, and avoid contact with them.
- Use hypoallergenic cosmetics.
- Pat your skin dry instead of rubbing it.
- Try to avoid using solvents and chemicals, and wear protective gloves when you must use them.
- Use a dishwasher, or wear gloves when you wash dishes.

Published by McKesson Corporation.

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