

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.

What is the cause?

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

How is it diagnosed?

Your provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history and examine you. Your provider will also ask about any travel you have done, your work duties, your hobbies, etc., to try to identify 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 1 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.

With treatment, the rash should get better in a few days. If the rash gets infected, you may need antibiotics and it will take a few days longer before your skin is completely healed.

How can I take care of myself?

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

- Put cool, moist cloths on the areas of skin with dermatitis to help lessen itching. But do not keep the area covered. The rash will usually heal more quickly if it is left open to the air.
- 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.
- Avoid further contact with the substance that seems to cause the dermatitis. You may need to wash your clothes, shoes, or any materials that may also have touched the irritant (such as when you've had contact with poison ivy). If you have a pet that may have come into contact with an irritant like poison ivy, you may need to carefully give your pet a bath. The poison ivy oil (also called resin) can stay on clothing and fur and cause more irritation when you touch it.

Ask your provider:

- How long it will take to recover
- What activities you should avoid and when you can return to your normal activities
- How to take care of yourself at home
- What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them

Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup.

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.

You may need to stop using makeup one product at a time to see if any one product seems to make your rash worse.

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.
- Clean your dishes in a dishwasher, or wear gloves when you wash dishes.

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