



Fact Sheet 6

Hand Eczema

It has been reported that up to 10% of the population (1 in every 10 people) may suffer hand eczema (also known as hand dermatitis).

Hand eczema can vary in severity, from a mild form affecting just a small area of skin to severe symptoms affecting the whole hand. Several different types of eczema (atopic, allergic contact, irritant contact) can affect the hands and more than one type can occur at the same time.

Unfortunately, there is no long-term cure for the condition, but it can be controlled and troublesome symptoms reduced. It should be possible to achieve short term clearance of your hand eczema so it's worth keeping on trying until you find a treatment that works for you.

If you suspect you have hand eczema or other skin problems on your hands it's a good idea to visit your GP to get a firm diagnosis. The earlier your hand eczema is treated, the sooner you may be able to prevent it from taking hold and developing into long-term (chronic) hand eczema.

How can I tell if I have hand eczema or not?

Regardless of what type of hand eczema you have, and whether it is a mild, moderate or severe form of the condition, you will recognise one or more of these telltale symptoms:

- Dry, peeling, flaking skin (desquamation)
- Redness (erythema)
- Itching (pruritis)
- Pain
- Cracked skin (fissures)
- Blisters (vesicles or 'pompholyx')
- Thickened skin (hyperkeratosis)
- Swollen hands (oedema, caused by excess fluid within the tissues of the hand)

Other conditions, such as psoriasis, can be mistaken for hand eczema as it can be difficult even for specialist dermatologists to tell the difference.

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How do I know which type(s) of hand eczema I have?

Several different types of eczema (atopic, allergic contact, irritant contact) can affect your hands and more than one type can occur at the same time.

Type of eczema	Fast facts	Body parts affected	Common triggers
Atopic	The most common type of eczema It is most frequent in the first five years of life but can resurface in adulthood as localised hand eczema	Hands as well as other parts of the body	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Extreme temperatures• Sweating• Stress
Allergic contact	Can develop 'out of the blue' after having previously used or worn something for a long time with no allergic reaction Skin reaction may not occur immediately, but after a day or two after contact with the substance	Mainly hands	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nickel• Perfume• Latex
Irritant contact	Can develop after frequent contact with things that irritate the skin. Worse in cold, dry weather	Mainly hands	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Water• Chemicals• Cleaning products• Handling certain foods

Could my work or hobbies affect my hand eczema?

Irritant contact hand eczema is the most common work-related skin condition. Some high-risk professions are:

- Catering
- Construction
- Dentistry
- Gardening
- Hairdressing
- Health services
- Metal machining
- Motor vehicle industry
- Printing

If you suspect work or hobbies are the source of your hand eczema speak to your GP, who may refer you to a specialist for a test to try and determine the exact cause.

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What can I do at work about my hand eczema?

If you work in a job that is associated with a high risk of hand eczema, keep an eye on the condition of your hands and take precautions, eg wear gloves when handling chemicals or certain foods, to try to avoid potential hand eczema flare-ups.

Why should I tell my employer about my hand eczema?

Your employer has a duty to protect your health, safety and welfare whilst you are at work and must take measures to achieve this

If you find that a substance at work is causing or aggravating your hand eczema, you should tell your employer so that they can take reasonable measures to prevent it from happening.

How can I find out what causes my hand eczema?

Your GP or healthcare professional may start by asking you if you have noticed anything in particular that you think may be causing your hand eczema. They may also ask you about your work and your daily life to see if either of them has triggered your hand eczema. Then they may perform one of the following tests to determine the exact cause of your hand eczema:

Type of test	What it tests	How the test is performed	Test results
Skin prick test	Finds out if your hand eczema is caused by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An allergen (a substance that causes an allergic reaction), <i>or</i> • An irritant (a substance that can damage the skin) 	Small drops of allergen solution are pricked into the outer layers of your skin This test is usually carried out on the inner forearm or your back	If you are allergic to the allergen, you will develop a small, red, itchy swollen patch of skin
Allergy blood test	Tests for substances that cause an immediate allergy reaction	A small sample of blood is taken from your arm and sent to a laboratory to be tested for the amount of allergy antibodies (IgE) in the blood	Results reveal how allergic you are to substances Results may not come back from the laboratory for a few weeks
Patch test	Tests suspected allergens	Small amounts of suspected allergens are placed on the skin of your back, upper arms or chest and covered with sticky pieces of tape (the patches) so that the allergens are absorbed into the skin	After two days, and possibly again after that, your healthcare professional will inspect your skin to see if there have been any reactions If you are allergic to an allergen, you will develop a small, red, itchy swollen patch of skin

What treatments are available for my hand eczema?

Although eczema cannot be cured, there are a number of treatment options available to help you manage and control it. The aims of eczema treatment should be to heal the skin, keep it in good condition and manage the symptoms of an attack or flare-up.

What treatments are available from my pharmacist?

Topical (applied to skin) treatments	Action
Emollients (creams, lotions and ointments)	Soothes and softens the skin by moisturising. Helps protect against irritation and infection
Mild steroid creams (eg hydrocortisone)	Calms symptoms by suppressing the body's inflammatory response to bring flare-ups of eczema under control

Complementary medicines

A variety of complementary medicines, eg evening primrose oil supplements, borage oil, homeopathy and Chinese herbal medicines, have been employed with varying degrees of success in the treatment of atopic eczema.

What treatments are available from my doctor?

If you have had hand eczema for some time and have tried various treatments without having success, do not give up. There are other treatment options available that your GP or a Dermatologist/specialist can prescribe.

Topical (applied to skin) treatments	Action
Topical steroid creams (eg betamethasone)	Calms more severe symptoms by suppressing the body's inflammatory response
Topical non-steroid immunosuppressants (eg tacrolimus, pimecrolimus)	Helps reduce inflammation and are not associated with skin thinning
PUVA (psoralen and UV light)	May help reduce exaggerated immune response in certain types of eczema

Oral treatments	Action
Retinoid capsules/tablets (eg alitretinoin)	Treats severe hand eczema which has not adequately responded to treatment with strong steroid creams
Corticosteroid tablets (eg prednisolone)	Short term treatment of severe hand eczema where creams have not been effective
Immunosuppressant Tablets/capsules/ (eg azathioprine/ciclosporin)	Dampens down the body's immune responses
Antibiotics	Prescribed if your eczema has become infected
Antihistamines	Helps reduce the itch of eczema at night and helps break patterns of sleeplessness

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Where can I find out more about my hand eczema?

Before you visit your GP or healthcare professional, visit the website www.myhandeczema.co.uk where you can find out more about your condition and obtain informative downloads. If you want to, you can download a PDF of questions you might like to ask your GP or healthcare professional during your appointment.

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