

MANAGING YOUR CONTACT DERMATITIS

Contact dermatitis is a common skin irritation. More than 50% of adult Americans have had it at least once.



A substance produced by poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac is one common cause of contact dermatitis. Others include



Medicines



Household cleaners and fragrances (e.g., in laundry soaps)



Clothing (wool)



The metal nickel (in jewelry)

Contact dermatitis looks like dry, red, or blistered areas on the skin.



Your doctor will make a diagnosis from your history of exposure and by looking at your skin.



What Is Contact Dermatitis?

Contact dermatitis is a common skin irritation due to exposure to a skin irritant. Contact dermatitis is not infectious.

More than 50% of adult Americans have had it at least once.

What Causes Contact Dermatitis?

Causes include substances that come into direct contact with the skin and irritate it or cause skin allergies. The resin urushiol, produced by poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac plants, is a common cause. Contact with the substance may occur not only by touching the plants but also clothing or pets carrying the substance.

Other causes include clothing (wool), household cleaners, fragrances (e.g., in soaps, shampoos), the metal nickel, dyes, medicines, pesticides, and other chemicals.

What Are the Symptoms of Contact Dermatitis?

Symptoms include dry, red, or blistered skin; itching; and mild discomfort. Intense itching and burning of the skin develop 24 to 36 hours after exposure, followed by weeping blisters and crusting and swelling of the skin. The liquid in the blisters is not infectious to others.

Breathing in or swallowing the substance can cause wheezing or nausea. Scratching the skin may lead to infection.

How Is Contact Dermatitis Diagnosed?

The doctor will diagnose dermatitis from the history of exposure and by looking at the skin.

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The best treatment is avoiding exposure. Lotions and oatmeal baths can be soothing.



Other treatments include steroids and antihistamines.



Although exercise is important, hot, sweaty skin will itch more. Wash and cool the skin soon after exercise.

How Is Contact Dermatitis Treated?

The best treatment is avoiding exposure. For example, avoid buying wool clothes and blankets if you are sensitive to wool products, and learn to recognize poison ivy. Wear gloves, long sleeves, and long pants to avoid contact with the plants and anything that has touched them.

Other treatments include topical or oral antiinflammatory drugs (steroids), antihistamines (for itching), and immunotherapy (desensitization) to minimize the reaction.

Steroids (such as prednisone) can be given in pill form, injection, or as creams and ointments.

Lotions, such as calamine, and oatmeal baths soothe oozing, blistery rashes and may be used as needed.

DOs and DON'Ts in Managing Contact Dermatitis:

- ✓ **DO** use your oral steroids as directed. Oral antihistamines can be used as needed and stopped if itching improves.
- ✓ **DO** use anti-itch lotions as needed, but avoid using them during the first hour after applying steroids, creams, or ointments. (Give the steroid time to soak in first!)
- ✓ **DO** eat a good diet.
- ✓ **DO** exercise, but realize that hot, sweaty skin will itch more. Wash and cool the skin soon after exercise.
- ✓ **DO** use a mild soap or cleanser to clean skin. Avoid extra irritation that might be caused by deodorants or fragrances in soaps.
- ✓ **DO** wash your skin immediately with soap and water if you're exposed to a substance that caused previous contact dermatitis.
- ✓ **DO** call your doctor if you have a fever, coughing, wheezing, vomiting, or diarrhea; if the rash worsens despite treatment; or if a new or different rash occurs.
- ⊗ **DON'T** skip doses of steroid medicines. Your dermatitis may worsen.
- ⊗ **DON'T** use antihistamine lotions or creams without your doctor's advice. These can cause rashes themselves!

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact the following sources:

- Asthma and Allergy Foundation of American
Tel: (800) 727-8462
Website: <http://www.aafa.org>
- American Academy of Dermatology
Tel: (866) 503-SKIN (503-7546)
Website: <http://www.aad.org>