



CONTACT DERMATITIS

What is contact dermatitis?

As with all forms of dermatitis, contact dermatitis is characterized by a rash and signs of inflammation such as redness, swelling, and itching. What sets contact dermatitis apart from other inflammatory skin disorders is that it occurs when the skin comes into contact with an irritant or allergy-producing substance. There are a variety of different substances commonly encountered in the home, workplace, or general environment, one very well known kind of contact dermatitis is caused by poison ivy or poison oak plants.

Who gets contact dermatitis?

People who develop allergic contact dermatitis are those whose skins are hypersensitive, or allergic, to a particular substance (or substances). If members of your immediate family suffer from bouts of allergic contact dermatitis, there is a greater likelihood that you will, too. People who develop irritant contact dermatitis may be having a reaction to a strong or mild chemical irritant.

Some people have chronic contact dermatitis present constantly, and others have recurring bouts of contact dermatitis each time they are exposed to a substance to which they are allergic.

What are the symptoms?

In very mild contact dermatitis, there may be itching and slight reddening of the skin that soon goes away on its own. In more severe contact dermatitis, there can be marked swelling, itching, and blistering of the affected skin. Any part of the body that comes into contact with an offending substance can be involved, or the offending substance may be transferred to the face or other body parts by the hands.

What are some common causes?

Potential causes of irritant contact dermatitis range from mild irritants like soap, detergents, and even water to strong chemicals, such as acids or alkalines. Possible causes of allergic contact dermatitis include ingredients used in cosmetics (such as moisturizers, nail polish, fragrances, or preservatives), chemicals used in the manufacture of shoes and clothing (such as underwear, pantyhose or rubber gloves), medications applied topically to the skin, dyes, metal compounds (especially nickel in earrings), many industrial and household chemicals, and plants such as ragweed or poison ivy.

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Another type of contact dermatitis, known as a photoallergic or phototoxic reaction, occurs when the skin is exposed to sunlight after contact with certain chemicals. These include ingredients in sunscreens, aftershaves or perfumes, and a variety of plants and topical medications.

What is the best treatment?

Ideally, removal of the offending substance is the best first line of attack, but figuring out the exact cause of contact dermatitis can be complicated. For some, sensitivity develops over a long period of time; people are often surprised to learn that they have become allergic to a product or substance they have been using for years.

If the cause of your contact dermatitis is not easy to determine, your physician may wish to perform a procedure known as “patch testing”. In this diagnostic procedure, a number of common allergens are taped to the back or upper arm for two days and then observed for redness, blisters, swelling, and itching.

Your physician may recommend a soothing compress to ease the discomfort of the acute, blistering stage of contact dermatitis. After that, he or she may prescribe a topical steroid cream or gel to reduce itching, redness, and swelling. In cases of very severe inflammation, a course of oral corticosteroid therapy may be needed.