

Contact Dermatitis: What You Should Know

What is contact dermatitis?

It is when your skin has a reaction to something you touch. The skin may get itchy, red, and swollen. You may also get blisters or bumps.

What causes it?

It can be caused by irritants, like soap, perfume, lotion, latex, and makeup. It can also be caused by an allergen. The most common allergens that cause contact dermatitis are a chemical in poison ivy and oak, nickel (used in things like jewelry, metal buttons, and zippers), and fragrances. Touching certain foods may also cause it.

How do I know if I have it?

The reaction varies depending on the part of the body that is affected. It may be worse on the eyelids, genitals, and neck. It is usually not as bad on the bottoms of the hands and feet and on the scalp.

Your doctor will ask you about anything that you have touched recently that may be causing the reaction. You might need a patch test to see if your skin reacts to certain substances.

How is it treated?

Avoid whatever causes the reaction. If you know that you are allergic to something, like poison ivy, wash your skin with soap and water quickly after you touch it.

If you are allergic to nickel, you can cover the metal button of your jeans with an iron-on patch or clear nail polish. Don't wear costume jewelry because it usually contains nickel.

Cool compresses may soothe your skin. Your doctor may also suggest medicine that you can put on your skin or in your bath water. You may need oral medicine for a bad reaction.

How can I prevent it?

- Most people are allergic to poison ivy and oak, so look out for it when you are outside
- Avoid anything that has made your skin red and itchy, or wear gloves if you can't avoid it
- Wear gloves that don't contain latex
- Tell your doctor if you have a reaction after putting medicine on your skin
- If you touch something that makes your skin red and itchy, wash your skin and everything that you were wearing so that you don't get another reaction later

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This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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