



# Protecting Your Hands

*For people with hand dermatitis (hand eczema)*

**This handout explains how to protect your hands if you have hand dermatitis, also known as hand eczema.**

Hand *dermatitis* is very common. It usually occurs because you have sensitive skin and have touched something that irritated your skin or that you are allergic to.

Most people touch soaps and detergents that can irritate skin many times a day. We also touch raw food, solvents, paint, oil, grease, acid, glue, and other irritating substances at work or in the home.

People with hand dermatitis often have dermatitis other places on their bodies. And, they often have family members who also have dermatitis.

Not everyone gets hand dermatitis. Many people seem to have “tough skin.” If you have dermatitis, we cannot make your skin tougher, but we can treat and heal most dermatitis.

## Prevention and Treatment

Protecting your skin is an important part of treating your dermatitis. Carefully read the instructions in this handout every day for 1 week. This will help you make skin protection a habit.

- **Wear waterproof heavy-duty vinyl gloves** to protect your hands from soap, detergent, scouring powder and other harsh chemicals. The gloves can be lined or unlined. Heavy-duty vinyl gloves are better than rubber gloves because some people become allergic to rubber gloves.
- **Make sure the gloves are the right size for you.** Gloves that are too big can slip off easily, and gloves that are too small are hard to put on.
- **Buy 4 or 5 pairs of the gloves** so that you can put a pair in different rooms of your house. These gloves usually cost less than \$5 a pair.
- **Wear white cotton gloves under the vinyl gloves.** Buy plenty of white cotton gloves so that they can be washed often.
- **If a glove gets a hole in it, discard it right away.** Wearing a glove with a hole in it is the same as not wearing a glove at all – and sometimes it can be worse!
- **Wear gloves when you handle foods** that contain acid. Some of these are lemons, oranges, grapefruit, potatoes, and tomatoes.

## Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns. UWMC clinic staff are also available to help.

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- **Wear leather or heavy-duty fabric gloves when you are doing dry work, and especially when you are gardening.** Get your gloves dirty instead of your hands so that you do not have to wash your hands so often.
- **Buy a dozen pairs of cheap cotton gloves and place them in different rooms** in your home for doing dry housework, such as dusting. When these gloves get dirty, you can wash them in the washing machine.
- **Use a dishwasher and washing machine.** Do not wash dishes or clothes by hand unless you wear heavy-duty waterproof gloves.
- **Avoid direct contact with household products that contain solvents.** These include turpentine, paint, paint thinner, and polishes (metal, floor, furniture, and shoe polish). Wear heavy-duty waterproof gloves when using them.
- **Use lukewarm water and very mild soap when you wash your hands.** Be sure to rinse the soap off thoroughly (soaps are irritating). Dry your hands gently.
- **Lubricate your hands right after you wash them.** Place a lubricant near all the sinks you use. Take a small container of lubricant with you when you go out.

Petroleum jelly (Vaseline) works well to moisturize and protect your hands. It keeps your skin from getting dry. It also does not cost very much. If it feels too greasy, apply a tiny amount when your hands are wet and rub it in well. It is best to apply very small amounts often. If your hands feel too greasy after applying Vaseline, next time make sure your hands are wet enough and apply less.

- **Remove your rings when you do housework and before you wash your hands.** Irritating materials can get trapped under rings and make dermatitis worse.
- **Wear gloves to protect your hands from drying or chapping when you go outdoors in cold or windy weather.**
- **Use only the medicines and hand lubricants your health care provider has prescribed.** Other lotions, creams, or medicines may irritate your skin.

There is no fast, “magic” treatment for hand dermatitis. Your skin must have a rest from irritation to heal. Follow the above instructions carefully.

## Follow-up Care

You will need to protect your hands for **at least** 4 months after your dermatitis has healed, and maybe longer. It takes a long time for skin to recover, and dermatitis tends to come back if you are not careful.

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