

UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

CONTACT DERMATITIS**WHAT IS IT?**

Contact dermatitis is a common inflammatory reaction that occurs when the skin comes in contact with an irritant or allergen.

- Irritants cause direct injury to the skin, resulting in an immediate inflammatory reaction. Any substance can act as an irritant if the concentration, duration, and frequency of exposure is sufficient.
- Allergens cause an immune-mediated reaction that can take minutes or days to occur. Allergies can develop to substances that have not caused problems in the past. Reactions can also vary in the same person over time.

Irritants and allergens can include soaps, detergents, deodorants, perfumes, cosmetics, leather, wool, new clothing (due to chemicals from the manufacturing process), metals, medications, poison ivy/oak, etc. Specific skin areas are more likely to be affected by certain agents:

- Face and neck:
 - Mouthwashes, toothpaste, preservatives in contact lens solutions
 - Hair sprays or dyes, cosmetics (eye make-up, lipsticks), facial products
 - Hatbands (forehead), nickel (earlobes, neck)
 - Sunscreens, insect sprays
- Hands and forearms:
 - Soaps, lotions (soap may also cause skin irritation under rings)
 - Wrist bands, metal backs of watches, rings
 - Nail polish remover, industrial chemicals
 - Poison ivy, oak, or sumac
- Underarm:
 - Deodorant, dress shields
 - Dry cleaning solutions
- Trunk
 - Clothing (particularly if new and not previously laundered)
 - Rubber or metal attached to clothing (belt buckles, zippers, buttons)
- Genital area:
 - Douches, powder, scented panty liners
 - Contraceptives (spermicides, condoms)
 - Colored toilet paper, fabric softeners
 - Medicated creams/ointments
- Generalized reaction:
 - Airborne chemicals (spray paint, ragweed)
 - Medications, soaps, or skin products applied to large areas of the body
 - Clothing

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Irritants and allergens can cause immediate or delayed reactions at the site of exposure. Rashes vary in appearance but are often red and itchy.

- Some rashes are raised and hive-like. Others start as red bumps that may eventually blister and weep. Some lesions may be dry and scaly, while others have a burn-like quality.
- Poison ivy exposure commonly results in a linear pattern where the skin has come in contact with branches or leaves.
- Warmth, swelling, or tenderness of the skin may also be present.
- Excessive scratching can lead to thickened skin and bacterial infections.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT?

- Avoid the irritant or allergen! If possible, wash the substance off with copious amounts of water.
- Be gentle to your skin. Avoid harsh soaps, hot water, and scrubbing at lesions.
- Do not scratch! Scratching increases the chance of getting a bacterial infection.
- Medications may be recommended to control moderate to severe symptoms.

■ **MEDICATIONS**

- Oral antihistamines can decrease the allergic response and itching. Many patients take a non-sedating medication like Zyrtec, Claritin, or Allegra in the morning, and a sedating antihistamine like Benadryl or Vistaril at bedtime.
- Corticosteroid creams are used to decrease inflammation and itching. They work better if used before blisters develop. Only a thin layer of the medication is needed to be effective. Excessive or long-term use can cause thinning and whitening of the skin. Steroid creams should not be used on the face or neck unless specifically directed by your healthcare provider.
- Corticosteroid pills may be prescribed for more severe or widespread symptoms. Take these medications as directed. They should also be taken with food to avoid an stomach upset.

■ **FOR POISON IVY, OAK, OR SUMAC, TAKE THESE ADDITIONAL MEASURES:**

An allergic reaction to the oil from the plant (urushiol) usually occurs 12-48 hours after exposure, resulting in an itchy rash. Touching the rash or any oozing blisters will not spread the rash because urushiol bonds to the skin within minutes. However, scratching can increase the risk of developing a bacterial infection.

IF YOU THINK YOU'VE COME IN CONTACT WITH POISON IVY,

- **Wash exposed areas with soap and lukewarm water as soon as possible.** The sooner you cleanse the skin, the greater the chance you have of removing and preventing further spread of the plant oil.
 - Washing within 10 minutes is ideal because less of the oil has bonded to your skin. After an hour or so, the oil has usually penetrated the skin, but washing can still decrease the severity of the reaction.
 - Don't forget to wash under the fingernails!
- **You can also use over-the-counter products to remove urushiol from the skin.**
 - Tecnu and Zanfel can be quite effective but are fairly expensive.
 - Dishwashing soap (like Dial Ultra) and oil-removing compounds (like Goop) are also effective.
- After washing the exposed areas, **take a shower with soap and warm water as soon as possible.**
- **Wash any belongings, including pets, that may have been exposed.** Because urushiol does not evaporate, it can remain on virtually any surface until it's washed off. The smoke from a burning plant or even contact with dried uprooted plants can result in an allergic reaction.
 - **Wash your clothes, shoes, gloves, tools, camping gear, etc. with warm soapy water.** Launder clothes in hot water when possible.
 - **Use long rubber gloves and pet shampoo to wash your pets.** Most pets are not sensitive to poison ivy, but the oil can stick to their fur and cause a reaction in someone who touches them.

ONCE THE RASH IS PRESENT,

- **Medications** as described above may be used to control symptoms.
 - Sedating antihistamines, like Benadryl, may help improve sleep disrupted by itching.
 - However, non-sedating antihistamines are generally not effective because the itch from poison ivy is not due to the release of histamines.
- **Other non-prescription treatments include:**
 - Burow's or Domeboro's soaks (to dry out blisters)
 - Wet compresses applied for 15-30 minutes several times daily
 - Aveeno oatmeal baths (use cool water)
 - Calamine lotion (to dry out blisters)
 - Menthol-containing lotions
 - Zanfel (available at drugstores)
- **Steroid pills** may be recommended for the treatment of lesions involving the face, eyes, mucous membranes, genitalia, or any large body surface area.

AVOID EXPOSURE TO POISON IVY BY:

- Wearing protective clothing (long-sleeve shirts, pants, socks, gloves, etc.).
- Using over-the-counter products like Ivy Block to protect the skin prior to exposure. Ivy Block should be applied to the skin every 4 hours as needed.

NOTIFY YOUR HEALTHCARE PROVIDER IMMEDIATELY IF YOU HAVE:

- A fever over 100°F.
- Pus coming from any blisters.
- A rash that covers large areas of your body.
- A rash in your eyes, mouth, face, or genital area.
- A rash that does not get better in a few days.

RECOMMENDED WEBSITES: www.mayoclinic.com, www.aad.org