

Contact Dermatitis

What causes Contact Dermatitis (a form of eczema)?

Two causes of contact dermatitis are exposure to **allergens** and **irritants**. An allergy occurs when the immune system reacts to a chemical. An irritant can be a strong soap or chemical.

Exposure to allergens and irritants frequently occurs in the workplace.

An allergy causes contact dermatitis in two ways:

- Contact urticaria – the immediate appearance of hives (transient itchy swellings)
- Allergic contact dermatitis – chronic areas of itchy, red, crusty or scaly skin

Irritant contact dermatitis is produced by repeated exposure to a harsh or drying chemical that damages the outer skin barrier. Damage can be:

- Acute (sudden and quick) after contact with a high concentration of a chemical that sets off a reaction such as a burn
- Chronic (persistent) or delayed (when it occurs after months or years of contact with an irritant)

Contact Dermatitis and the Workplace

How common is it?

The number of cases of contact dermatitis in Canada is not currently known but according to some US statistics, skin disorders comprise more than forty-five percent of all occupationally related diseases. Among all occupational dermatitis, irritant contact dermatitis accounts for about 80 percent and allergic contact dermatitis accounts for about 30 percent (some patients have both).

Can you still work?

Most workers who have contact dermatitis can return to work. It will depend on:

- what kind of contact dermatitis you have
- how severe it is
- how it is treated

Think you may have occupational eczema?

Ask yourself these questions:

- ✓ Did your skin problem start when you changed jobs?
- ✓ Does your skin problem improve when you are away from your job?
- ✓ Do you think that any specific substance at work is causing your skin problem?

If you have answered 'yes' to any of these questions, consult your dermatologist.

Cool compresses relieve inflammation and itching.

Follow these easy instructions for fast relief:

- Use several layers of cheesecloth or soft cotton cloth cut to fit over the affected area.
- Soak the cloth with tap water or Burow's solution
- Place on the skin for 20 to 30 minutes
- Keep the cloth continuously wet and uncovered to allow evaporation
- Then pat the skin dry and apply your medication

SOME IRRITANTS AND ALLERGENS FOUND IN MANY JOBS

Job	Irritant	Allergen
Agriculture workers	Artificial fertilizers, disinfectants, pesticides, cleaners, gasoline, diesel oil, plants and grains	Rubber, oats, barley, animal feed, veterinary medications, cement, plants, pesticides, wood preservatives
Cabinet makers, and carpenters	Glues, detergents, thinners, solvents, wood preservatives	Stains, glues, woods, turpentine, varnishes, colophony
Construction workers	Cement	Chromates, cobalt, rubber and leather gloves, resins, woods
Daycare workers	Detergents, cleaners, wet work	
Dentists and dental technicians	Detergents, hand cleansers, wet work	Local anaesthetics, mercury, methacrylates, eugenol, disinfectants, rubber, dental impression material
Electricians	Soldering fluxes	Fluxes, resins, rubber
Hairdressers	Permanent wave solutions, shampoos, bleaching agents, wet work	Dyes, persulphates, nickel, perfumes, rubber
Homemakers	Detergents, cleansers, foods, wet work	Rubber gloves, foods, spices, flavours, nickel, chromates, polishes
Mechanics	Oils, greases, gasoline, diesel fuel, cleaners, solvents	Rubber gloves, chromates, epoxy resin, antifreeze
Medical personnel, Nurses, Hospital workers	Disinfectants, detergents, wet work	Latex gloves, anaesthetics, antibiotics, antiseptics, phenothiazines, formaldehyde, glutaraldehyde, liquid chloroxylenol, hand creams
Plastics workers	Solvents, acids, styrene, oxidizing agents	Hardeners, phenolic resins, polyurethanes, acrylics, plasticizers
Teachers	Chalk dust	

Information provided by WSIB. To view the full Workplace Contact Dermatitis fact sheet go to: www.wsib.on.ca/wsib/wsbsite.nsf/Public/FactSheetsOccupationalDisease

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For more information about contact dermatitis and your workplace, call the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS), 1-800-668-4284 or on the internet at www.ccohs.ca