

Irritant contact dermatitis

Irritant contact dermatitis is the most commonly-occurring eczema on the hands and feet. The skin is dry and reddened, itches and may peel.

It most often occurs because of excessive hygiene with soap and water, water-alcohol solutions or derivatives. These substances remove the fatty layer that acts as the skin's protective barrier.

Soap is usually more aggressive than water-alcohol solutions, which are glycerine-based, thus reducing irritation. Detergent-free soaps cause less irritation than regular soaps and disinfect equally.

How to prevent it

- **Avoid damaging the skin.** Try not to disinfect your hands with homemade solutions or alcohol, and avoid direct contact with bleach or other very aggressive products.
- **Apply moisturising cream or ointment.** The creamier, the better. It boosts the skin's protective barrier. After disinfecting your hands, let some time go by before putting the cream on.

How is it treated?

If you already have dermatitis, **emollients** are used as a moisturiser. They have a powerful hydrating effect and are recommended for very dry skin.

On the hands: if you already have eczema on your hands (dry and reddish skin, itching, peeling, tightness, cracks), your skin will not tolerate moisturising cream. You will need to apply a medium or high-potency topical corticosteroid cream or ointment (which your doctor will prescribe) for a few days.

How much corticosteroid cream should I apply? Just a little. For each area of affected skin the size of the palm or back of the hand, use an amount similar to the length of half a phalanx (see picture). Massage it in until it has been absorbed.



If the affected areas itch, you may take an oral antihistamine (tablet or syrup). Try not to scratch. If the area affected is significant (cracks or infection), you may also need a topical antibiotic. **After the acute phase, continue using a moisturising cream** between washing and hand-washing, and before going to bed.

What if I have dermatitis on my face? Use the same preventive method: moisturising creams. These creams can worsen acne, seborrheic dermatitis and rosacea.

Use a lower potency corticosteroid cream or lotion on the face. Apply a minimal amount only to the affected areas, for the shortest possible time.

If I already have dermatitis, how should I wash my hands?

You can use less aggressive **detergent-free soaps**. If possible, wear gloves, which can be disinfected with a water-alcohol solution. This will reduce the amount of direct hand hygiene required.