

The dermatologist informs about
Hand eczema

The Danish Dermatological Society

HAND ECZEMA

Hand eczema is a common disease. Hand eczema often appears early in life - with 1/3 of patients even before the age of 20 - and women are more frequently diagnosed with hand eczema than men. Hand eczema is mostly provoked by external factors on the skin, e.g. from substances in direct contact with the skin. This is called contact dermatitis. The factors can be substances that irritate the skin or destroy the skin barrier and thereby cause eczema. This is called irritative contact dermatitis. Also allergenic substances can cause eczema when they come in contact with the skin. This is called allergic contact dermatitis. Occasionally, hand eczema is not caused by contact dermatitis, but occurs without any known cause. In order to find the right treatment for the eczema and prevent new outbreaks, it is important to know what type of hand eczema you have. Whether the eczema is caused by irritation, allergy or internal factors, requires further examination.

Irritative contact dermatitis

This type of eczema is the most common and is caused by exposure of the skin to greater stress than it can tolerate. Everyone can develop irritative eczema, but some can tolerate more stress with skin irritant substances than others before they develop eczema. If you have or have had atopic eczema (atopic dermatitis), you have a greater risk of getting irritative eczema. Examples of influences causing irritative eczema are water, soap, contact with certain foods, solvents or oils. The mechanical stress of paper, cardboard or tools can also cause irritative eczema.

Allergic contact eczema

Allergy to one or more substances in a person's environment is found in about 1/4 of all hand eczema cases. If you are allergic to a substance and come into contact with it, you will develop allergic contact eczema. In most cases, the symptoms do not occur immediately but after 1-2 days. Nickel, perfume, preservatives and rubber additives are frequent causes of allergic eczema.

Other types of eczema

In more than 10% of all cases of hand eczema, it is not possible to detect a specific cause - and there is thus a possibility that the eczema is predetermined by hereditary factors. In some cases, psoriasis on the hands can be difficult to distinguish from hand eczema. Fungal infections on the hands can also look like eczema.

Allergy testing

In order to be able to determine the specific type of eczema, allergy testing is performed. Substances commonly known to provoke allergies will be tested, as well as substances from the workplace and home environment. Allergy testing is performed by using a patch test placed on the upper back. The patch test must be applied on the skin for two days, and a positive test will then reveal a spot of eczema. Readings of the patch test are performed after 3 and 5-7 days. If there are one or more positive tests, the doctor will decide whether the allergy is of importance for your current eczema.

Work-related?

If you suspect your eczema to be caused by your work, you should consult your doctor about notifying the National Board of Industrial Injuries in Denmark (Arbejdsskadestyrelsen). You may be entitled to compensation. Normally, the notification is made by the doctor, but you or your employer can also make it.

Treatment

Outbreaks of eczema must be treated quickly and efficiently in order to counteract the inflammation or persistent eczema changes. Corticosteroid creams and ointments will often bring an eczema outbreak to rest in a few days. The treatment is carried out for a few weeks, and once the eczema is at rest, it is important to slowly phase out the treatment in order to avoid relapse. Prolonged treatment is often necessary and must be arranged with the doctor. Strong corticosteroid creams are often well-tolerated in the palms, while the back of the hands are more prone to developing side effects of the treatment. Thin skin can be seen as a side effect in the areas where the cream is applied, but it often disappears when treatment ceases. Corticosteroid cream is typically applied once a day. Moisturizing creams are an important part of the treatment of hand eczema, and must be used several times a day. In case the eczema is infected, the doctor will prescribe antibiotics, either as cream or tablets. In severe cases of hand eczema, phototherapy or tablet therapy suppressing the immune system can be prescribed.

Prevention

Once the eczema is brought to rest, a long period of time will follow where the skin is delicate and more vulnerable to external shocks than it was before. During this period, it is particularly important that you take good care of your hands and avoid skin irritating influences such as abundance of water, soap and detergents. Use gloves to protect the skin from these influences. Since gloves can also irritate the skin through prolonged use, they must be used as little as possible. If gloves are used for more than 10 minutes, it is recommended that you wear cotton gloves under the protective gloves in order to counteract this irritation. If an allergy has been detected, it is absolutely essential to avoid the substance provoking the allergy. Sometimes hand washes can be replaced by hand disinfection with ethanol alcohol, which is much gentler to skin barrier.

Moisturizing creams must be applied several times a day in order to feed the skin with necessary fats and thereby counteract the eczema. A moisturizing cream with high fat content and without perfume is most suitable for hand eczema. Despite careful prevention, new eczema outbreaks are commonly experienced, and it is important to arrange with the doctor, how you can begin treatment yourself.

Future treatment

In case of new eczema outbreaks, careful daily skin care with moisturizer and a rapid initiation of treatment with corticosteroid creams will often keep the hand eczema at rest. However despite careful treatment, in some cases, the eczema can endure for a long time with recurring outbreaks over a number of years. The purpose of the treatment is to ensure fewer and less irritating outbreaks of eczema.

10 tips on treatment and prevention of hand eczema:

- Use gloves if working in wet surroundings
- Use gloves as long as necessary, but as short time as possible
- Gloves must be intact, clean and dry
- Wear cotton gloves under protective gloves
- Wash hands in cool water, rinse and dry them well
- Alcohol-based disinfectants can be used instead of soap when hands are not wet or visibly soiled
- Do not wear rings at work
- Use a moisturizing cream with high fat content and without perfume
- The moisturizing cream must be applied on the entire hand including fingers and the back of the hands.
- Take good care of the hands in your spare time, use gloves for wet work at home and use warm gloves when outdoors in winter.

Read about allergy at www.videncenterforallergi.dk