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8 Ways to Deal With That Frustrating Hand Eczema

Itching for relief? These derms are here to help.



Hand eczema is one of those things that might not sound *so* bad...unless you actually have it. It's easy for people to dismiss eczema as dry skin that just goes a little overboard, but as anyone with the condition knows, there's way more to the itchy, inflamed story than that.

Eczema can create incredibly irritated and tender skin pretty much anywhere on your body. Unfortunately, your hands are one of the most likely—and inconvenient—spots for this skin condition to make itself known, according to the Mayo Clinic. Hand eczema can manifest in a few different ways, like an itchy rash with red or brown patches, thickened, cracked, scaly skin, or small raised bumps that weep fluid and get all crusty after you scratch them.

If you suspect you have hand eczema, you really should see a dermatologist to get a proper diagnosis and treatment. Luckily, there are also a few ways to combat symptoms in the time between reading this and seeing your doctor.

1. Try to identify—and avoid—triggers that make your hand eczema flare up.

This one is easier said than done. (Hello, your hands touch a *lot* of stuff throughout the day!) Still, avoiding triggers can go a long way in taming your hand eczema.

Like other forms of eczema, hand eczema can get worse due to irritants like mold, pet dander, cold and dry air, rough fabrics like wool, and fragrances, according to the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID). If you realize that your hand eczema gets worse after exposing yourself to any of these things—or anything else—you should try steering clear of them as much as possible, Temitayo Ogunleye, M.D., assistant professor of dermatology at the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, tells SELF.

Sometimes avoiding your triggers isn't an option, like if you're a hair stylist and are often submerging your hands in sudsy water without much time to moisturize them. In that case, see your doctor for tips on the best ways to handle your eczema based on your lifestyle.

2. Use rubber gloves every time you wash dishes.

Rubber gloves can help reduce your exposure to dish soap, which can be an irritant for people with hand eczema, Cynthia Bailey, M.D., a diplomate of the American Board of Dermatology and founder of Dr. Bailey Skin Care, tells SELF. Rubber gloves can also protect your hands from hot water, which can further strip your skin of its natural oils, she says. “This leads to dryness, disruption of your skin barrier, and the cycle of damage that can end in eczema,” she says.

3. Take your piping-hot showers down a few notches until they're just lukewarm—and keep them short.

I guess you *could* technically wear rubber gloves in the shower, but that's not exactly practical. Instead, to protect your hands from the moisture-sapping properties of a long, hot shower, the Mayo Clinic recommends taking warm showers that only last for 10 or 15 minutes.

Fine, fine, you might be thinking. *But what about soap?* Funny you should ask.

4. Let only the gentlest soaps come into contact with your hands.

Soaps that have fragrance, alcohol, dyes, or other potential irritants can introduce your hands to a world of itchiness and dryness, according to the Mayo Clinic. So can antibacterial soap, which you may find is harsher on your skin than the regular kind, Melanie Kingsley, M.D., a dermatologist at Indiana University Health, tells SELF. (You also don't even need antibacterial soap, since normal soap does an excellent job of killing germs on its own.)

If you can, try to use a hypoallergenic hand cleanser whenever possible, Dr. Bailey says. They tend to be extra-gentle on your skin since their goal is to lower your chances of having an allergic reaction.

5. Use moisturizer after washing and drying your hands. Yes, every single time—and at other times, too.

If you're determined to curb your hand eczema, using a moisturizer after washing and drying your hands is essential, Gary Goldenberg, M.D., assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, tells SELF. Skipping this step is basically setting yourself up for irritation.

“If you allow your skin to dry without any moisturizer after washing, this enhances the dryness and natural [skin] barrier breakdown,” Dr. Kingsley says. Try keeping a container of moisturizer near your hand soap as a good reminder to lube up post-wash, and carry a travel-sized bottle with you when you're out in the world, living your life. If you have hand eczema, only moisturizing after washing probably won't cut it, so apply as often as you feel is necessary.

6. Choose a moisturizer that's specifically formulated to keep your skin from getting thirsty.

Just like with soaps, try to strike anything with perfume, dye, or other extraneous ingredients from your moisturizing list. Beyond that, it's a good idea to look for heavy, thick products that have ingredients meant to lock moisture into your skin. Glycerin is a humectant (meaning it helps attract water to your skin), so that can be a good option, Dr. Bailey says. Dimethicone, which is an occlusive (it helps block water loss from your skin and maintain your skin's moisture), can also be helpful. Petrolatum is another occlusive, so it's no surprise the NIAID specifically calls it out as a good moisturizer for people with eczema.

If you have no idea where to start in your moisturizer search, ask your doctor if they have any specific recommendations that are known to soothe hand eczema.

7. Soak your hands in a diluted bleach bath to get rid of excess bacteria.

In some cases, a diluted bleach bath may help your hand eczema calm down by decreasing eczema-exacerbating bacteria on your skin, according to the Mayo Clinic.

The key word here is “diluted,” because dunking your hands into a solution that contains too much bleach can just make your eczema worse. The Mayo Clinic recommends mixing just ½ cup of bleach in a 40-gallon bathtub filled with water, then soaking your hands for 10 minutes. If you're still a little wary, it's completely valid to ask your doctor if a diluted bleach bath might help your hand eczema before taking the plunge.

8. After washing your hands, pat them dry instead of rubbing, even if you're in a rush.

It's tempting to give your hands a quick rub-down with a towel after you wash them, but it's really better to gently pat them dry. Rubbing your hands too hard can traumatize your skin, Dr. Goldenberg says, which is exactly what someone with hand eczema *doesn't* need. As a bonus, patting can leave a little more wetness behind, which you can then seal in with the moisturizer of your choice, Dr. Kingsley says.

If you think your dry hands might be due to hand eczema, see your dermatologist. They can help you pinpoint the cause and come up with a specialized treatment plan for you.