

## **Alpha Trial: Hand Eczema Study Patient Education leaflet**

### **Caring for your hands**

This leaflet gives you some simple guidance on how to manage your hand eczema and care for your hands. A few simple changes can make a big difference.

#### **Summary Box: key messages**

**These simple activities should be followed carefully and routinely**

- 1. Protect your hands by giving attention to your skin care**
- 2. Use moisturisers (emollients) frequently**
- 3. Avoid allergens and irritants (things that make your hand eczema worse)**

### **What is hand eczema?**

- Hand eczema is one of the most common types of eczema (also known as hand dermatitis). In people with eczema, the body's immune system overreacts and the inflammatory reaction can affect the skin. It cannot be caught from or spread to other people.
- Hand eczema is mainly seen on the palms but can also affect other parts of the hand. The main symptom is an itchy, lumpy rash but other symptoms may include cracking, soreness and irritation and, in some cases, blisters may develop. The fingers may become quite swollen. The skin is generally dry, scaly and thickened. If the eczema is severe, the skin can crack and bleed which can become painful. Skin over the finger joints may split making it more difficult to do every day tasks such as doing up buttons, holding a pen or using a computer.
- Those who get hand eczema may have inherited genes that contribute lead to this chronic condition (atopic eczema) or have a work or occupational risk in which contact with certain materials or chemicals in the environment may cause an allergic or irritant reaction.

### **Why does eczema appear on the hands?**

- Hand eczema can be triggered by a reaction to contact with everyday things that irritate the skin, such as soap, detergents, engine oils, hair dyes, bleach, cold winds and foods. In the workplace, many people are exposed to chemicals that may act as triggers.
- For workplace related problems, your Occupational Health Department should be contacted at an early stage to help prevent or minimise your exposure to such chemicals.

- The skin on the palms of the hands is much thicker than elsewhere on the body (apart from the soles of the feet) and is normally able to withstand a great deal of wear and tear. But in those people, whose hands are regularly exposed to irritant products, the protective barrier of the skin breaks down and eczema may develop. People who have this form of hand eczema often have a history of eczema in childhood.
- Hand eczema can also involve an allergic reaction to a specific substance. An allergic rash often develops over a period of time through repeated contact. It is possible to be allergic to a number of different substances but common causes of contact sensitivity, as described above, include nickel, perfume, preservatives, chemicals, rubber, and various plants among many others. A person with allergic hand eczema will react to the substance every time it comes into contact with the skin.

### What are the treatments for hand eczema?

- The basis of treatment for hand eczema is to *avoid* any known irritants or allergens and then *treat* with emollients and topical steroids, where necessary.
- Emollients are moisturisers which should be used frequently throughout the day to prevent the skin from drying out. A soap substitute should also be used as it is gentler on the skin than soap.
- Topical steroids (steroids that you apply directly to the skin) are a form of medication that dampen down the inflammation and so help the skin to heal.
- If the skin is infected then you may need a short term antimicrobial treatment.
- Even when the eczema has cleared, your hands can remain very sensitive, so the use of cotton gloves under rubber gloves can be helpful when performing wet tasks. Using gloves in this way, after emollients have been rubbed into the hand first, will offer some protection to people whose job requires them to immerse their hands in water or use irritants.

### How can I improve my hand eczema?

- A good skincare routine, as detailed in this leaflet, is essential for managing hand eczema.
- If your eczema is not treated, your skin may get more irritated and itchy, leading to more scratching and damage to the skin. You may lose sleep at night, making you tired and less able to cope. If your skin is cracked, bleeding or weeping, it is liable to become infected. Infection makes eczema worse and delays healing.
- We have listed some simple tips below about how to wash, dry and moisturise your hands and how you can protect them.

### How should I wash and dry my hands?

- Avoid soap and detergents.
- Use a soap substitute which you like to clean your hands (soap substitutes are available in many shops or you can ask your General Practitioner (GP) for a prescription).
- Do not immerse or bathe your hands in hot water as this will cause itching and moisture to evaporate from your skin; warm water is better.
- Pat your hands dry with a soft towel. Take special care between the fingers where the skin is more prone to dryness and cracking. Avoid using electric hand driers in work or public places.

### Which emollient should I use?

- Emollients or moisturisers are a mixture of water, waxes, fats and oils in various proportions. They come in different types, both as creams (these contain more oil than water) or ointments (these are oil based only). They are also available in the form of a lotion (these contain more water than oil), but these are generally not suitable for hand eczema and so are normally best avoided.
- The most important thing is to find an emollient which you like and so are likely to use regularly. Emollients are available in many shops or you can ask your general practitioner for a prescription).
- Creams are easy to spread over sore skin and are not too greasy. They need to be applied frequently, every 2-3 hours. Because they contain water, they also have preservatives to prevent bacterial growth. Creams are most suitable when your hands are wet or weeping due to eczema.
- Some creams have added ingredients which attract water to the skin and last longer than ordinary creams and need to be applied every 6-12 hours. These creams may sting if applied to broken (scratched or cracked) skin and so may not be ideal for sensitive cracked areas of the hand. Some creams have added antimicrobial ingredients to treat infection, although some people can react to them. Other creams contain extra ingredients that reduce itch.
- Ointments are very greasy but effective for very dry, thickened skin, especially at night time. They act by sealing in moisture and reducing water loss from the skin. *However, they are not suitable for wet eczema*, and some people find they can be messy to use.

### When and how should I use an emollient (moisturiser)?

- You should apply your emollient to clean hands.
- A good time to put your emollients on is while your skin is still a little damp, as they soak in well and this helps to seal in the moisture.
- If the emollient comes in a tub rather than a pump dispenser, ideally it should be transferred into a new and clean container using a clean spoon or knife before each application to ensure the emollient is not contaminated with bacteria.
- You should apply a thin and even layer and smooth it gently into the skin (downwards, in the direction the hair grows to avoid blocking the hair follicles with oil or cream) so that it glistens.
- You should use your emollients as frequently as your skin needs them. Ensure you use an emollient of the right type, that you prefer using. A cream may need to be applied every 2-3 hours; water attracting creams and ointments need to be applied less frequently -as they will stay on the skin for longer.
- Do not stop using emollients just because you have run out or your eczema is under control. It is important that you *always* keep your skin moisturised so carefully plan your repeat prescriptions to make sure that you always have an in date supply of emollient available.

### How can I protect my hands?

- As far as possible, avoid contact with substances that may dry or irritate your skin.

- Wearing rings may worsen hand eczema. Rings should not be worn during housework, even when the eczema has visibly healed, as they may trap household chemicals that may irritate your skin and cause inflammation.
- When washing-up, use plastic or non-allergenic rubber gloves with a pair of cotton liners or if possible, ideally use a hand brush to minimise immersion of the hands in water or a dishwasher, avoiding the need to wash up by hand. Try not to wear any gloves for more than 20 minutes at a time as they can cause the skin to sweat and aggravate your eczema.
- Do not peel citrus fruit, onions, chillies or garlic with bare hands as many fruits and vegetables are irritants. If you do handle them with bare hands, wash your hands as soon as possible afterwards and apply an emollient.
- Wearing gloves may help to protect your hands *but* you will still need to establish a good skin care routine. This will include the use of soap substitute and an emollient cream or ointment.

### Hand eczema- being aware of the different terms used

You will have seen throughout this guide that different terms may be used to describe hand eczema that you may read or hear about elsewhere. The following are ways of describing hand eczema in medical terms to be aware of which refer to the same condition in different ways: hand eczema or hand dermatitis or similarly, contact eczema or dermatitis. This may be of an allergic or irritant nature or a mix of the two

### Where can I get more information?

There are many sources of information about hand eczema, it is important that you have access to reliable information and details of two sources we can recommend are provided below.

#### British Association of Dermatologists (BAD)

Willan House, 4 Fitzroy Square, London, W1T 5HQ

Web: [www.bad.org.uk](http://www.bad.org.uk)

- BAD Patient Information Leaflet: *Hand dermatitis – how to care for your hands* <http://www.bad.org.uk/for-the-public/patient-information-leaflets/hand-dermatitis-how-to-care-for-your-hands>

#### National Eczema Society (NES)

11 Murray Street, Camden, London, NW1 9RE

Eczema helpline: 0800 089 1122

Email: [helpline@eczema.org](mailto:helpline@eczema.org)

Web: [www.eczema.org](http://www.eczema.org)

- NES Fact sheet: Hand Eczema available at [www.eczema.org/factsheets](http://www.eczema.org/factsheets)
- NES Patient booklets – *Living with Eczema for Adults* <http://www.eczema.org/search> and *Could I have Contact Dermatitis* <http://www.eczema.org/products/42>



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