

# Ask the doctor about ...

## HAND ECZEMA



Dr. Neil Shear

Eczema Society of Canada asked leading Canadian dermatologist and eczema expert Dr. Neil Shear about hand eczema and how to manage this frustrating and painful condition.

### WHAT IS HAND ECZEMA?

Hand eczema (or hand dermatitis) describes any type of eczema that develops on the hands. It is commonly job-related and can be made worse by factors including frequent hand washing and exposure to chemicals. People who wash their hands frequently, work with chemicals or in wet work, or those who had eczema as children are more likely to get hand eczema.

### WHAT DOES HAND ECZEMA LOOK LIKE?

Hand eczema typically causes itchy, dry, scaly patches of skin that crack and flake. It can occur acutely, but may also be a condition referred to as chronic hand eczema (CHE) or chronic hand dermatitis (CHD).

### HOW IS HAND ECZEMA DIAGNOSED?

A thorough history and physical examination is essential in helping to determine the cause(s) of hand eczema. Medical, occupational and social history are important, as well as patch testing, as it can be challenging to distinguish different types of eczema, such as irritant contact dermatitis from allergic contact dermatitis.

### HOW IS HAND ECZEMA TREATED?

#### Lifestyle Modification and Self Care

Hand washing and frequent exposure to water are destructive to the skin barrier and should always be followed by applying moisturizer. Hand sanitizers may be a helpful alternative, however avoid fragrances, which may be irritating. Wearing gloves when doing wet work or working with potential irritants can also be helpful.

### Topical Therapies

To treat inflammation, topical therapies, such as topical corticosteroids, are commonly used when the eczema is actively flaring. These medications are typically applied to the skin in a cream or ointment. If your response is unexpectedly slow, discuss the possibility of corticosteroid allergy with your doctor. Another class of medications is topical calcineurin inhibitors, which may be helpful as an alternative to topical corticosteroids.

### Phototherapy

Phototherapy (Light Therapy), such as narrow-band UVB light and PUVA, are helpful for their local immunomodulatory effect. Speak to your doctor about the possibility of Phototherapy as a treatment option.

### Oral Medication

For some patients the severe symptoms never go away, or keep returning even after using potent topical steroids, there is a treatment called Tactin<sup>®</sup> (alitretinoin) which is a retinoid (a vitamin A based medicine) taken once a day in a pill form. Research shows significant improvement in patients with chronic hand eczema. Speak to your doctor about whether this treatment may be right for you.



Eczema Society of Canada thanks Dr. Shear for his volunteer contribution to this educational resource.

For additional information or support visit [eczemahelp.ca](http://eczemahelp.ca)

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