

# UNDERSTANDING DERMATITIS

## *Preventing Skin Inflammation*

If you've ever suffered from a severe sunburn, poison ivy, or similar irritations, you know how painful skin disorders can be. However, you may be surprised to realize that skin problems are the most common of all industrial illnesses, affecting over a million workers every year. Dermatitis, or skin inflammation, is largely preventable when you follow safety guidelines and use personal protective equipment as indicated.

### Allergen Or Irritant?

Although your skin does provide some natural defense against sunrays, bacteria, and mild irritants, it is no match for the host of agents that can cause severe skin inflammation and injury. Dermatitis can result from an allergic reaction to a substance to which you personally are sensitive (allergic dermatitis) or from contact with a known irritant such as solvents (contact dermatitis). In both cases, symptoms may include reddened, itchy, scaling, and/or blistered patches of skin.

### Allergic Dermatitis


Among the most common causes of allergic dermatitis are the oils of certain "poisonous" plants such as poison ivy, oak, and sumac. (Note: When these plants are burned, inhaling their smoke can also cause allergic reactions.) Certain individuals may be sensitive to substances that cause no adverse reactions in others—a particular soap product, for instance. In cases of allergic dermatitis, the best means of prevention is to avoid the substance causing the reaction. If you cannot altogether eliminate the allergen, you may need to use work gloves, barrier creams, protective

clothing, and other personal protective equipment such as respiratory or eye protection. (Do not use over-the-counter barrier creams unless they are approved by the plant physician.)

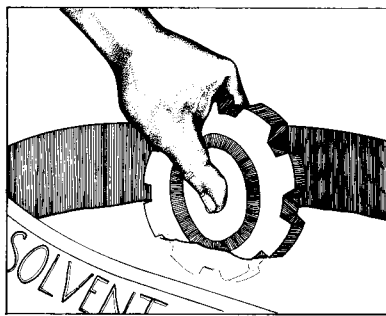
### Contact Dermatitis

The second type of dermatitis results when your skin comes in direct contact with a known irritant. These irritants may include alkalis, acids, solvents, metallic salts, petroleum and coal-tar products, and a number of chemical agents. Direct contact with these substances may not only result in skin irritation, but can also cause more severe problems such as burns and ulcerations. The severity of your reaction may vary depending upon the length of time you were exposed to the substance and the strength of the substance itself. To prevent contact dermatitis, work gloves, barrier creams, protective clothing, and other personal protective equipment (such as respiratory or eye protection) may be needed.

### Protecting Your Skin

Besides avoiding allergens and contact with known irritants, you can help protect your skin by using good hygiene—washing and showering after exposure to irritating substances, changing clothes frequently to avoid recontamination, and washing your work clothes separately from the rest of your laundry. You can also help keep your skin healthy by using sunscreen and protective clothing for outdoor activities, and by dressing appropriately for temperature extremes. Take care of your skin—it has to last you a lifetime! 

Allergic dermatitis can result from coming in contact with a substance to which you are sensitive.



Unsafe practices can lead to contact dermatitis—a skin reaction caused by direct contact with a known irritant.

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