

Experts in Skin & Hair

Patient Information Leaflet: Contact Allergic Dermatitis and Patch Testing

What is Contact Allergic Dermatitis?

Contact allergic dermatitis is a type of skin inflammation caused by an allergic reaction to a substance that comes into direct contact with the skin. This condition occurs when the immune system mistakenly identifies a harmless substance (allergen) as a threat, leading to an inflammatory response. An eczema reaction typically develops several days after exposure to the allergen.

Causes and Common Allergens:

Contact allergic dermatitis can be triggered by a wide variety of substances, including:

- **Nickel:** Found in jewellery, belt buckles, and metal fasteners.
- **Fragrances:** Present in cosmetics, lotions, and household products.
- **Preservatives:** Often used in personal care products and topical medications.
- **Rubber chemicals:** Found in gloves and other rubber products.
- **Chemicals:** Present in hair dyes, cleaning products.

Symptoms:

Symptoms of contact allergic dermatitis may include:

- Redness and swelling of the affected area
- Itching or burning sensation
- Dry, scaly, or cracked skin
- Blisters that may ooze or crust over
- Symptoms usually occur only in the areas of skin that came into contact with the allergen.

Diagnosis:

Your consultant may diagnose contact allergic dermatitis based on your medical history, physical examination, and knowledge of possible allergens. To identify the specific allergen causing the reaction, your provider may recommend patch testing.

What is Patch Testing?

Patch testing is a diagnostic procedure used to identify specific substances that trigger contact allergic dermatitis. During this test, small amounts of potential allergens are applied to your back under adhesive patches.

How Patch Testing Works:

1. **Preparation:** Your consultant will review your medical history and discuss the types of allergens you may have come into contact with.
2. **Application:** Small patches containing different allergens are placed on your back and left in place for 48 hours.
3. **Initial Reading:** After 48 hours, you will return to the clinic for an initial evaluation. The provider will check for any reactions to the allergens.
4. **Final Reading:** A second reading is done 48 hours after the initial assessment (four days after application) to evaluate delayed reactions which are more typical of a delayed type IV “true” allergic response.



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Interpreting Results:

- Your consultant will discuss the results of the patch testing with you. If a reaction occurs at the site of a specific allergen, it indicates a sensitivity to that substance.
- A detailed report will be provided, including recommendations on how to avoid the identified allergens in the future.

Management and Treatment Options:

Once the allergens are identified, management options may include:

1. **Avoiding Identified Allergens:** The best way to manage contact allergic dermatitis is to avoid substances that cause a reaction.
2. **Topical Corticosteroids:** Creams or ointments to reduce inflammation and relieve itching during flare-ups.
3. **Oral Antihistamines:** Medications to help alleviate itching and discomfort.
4. **Moisturisers:** Regular moisturising to help restore the skin barrier and prevent dry skin.

Self-Care Tips:

- Keep the affected area clean and dry.
- Avoid scratching, as this can worsen the condition.
- Use fragrance-free and hypoallergenic products to minimise irritation.
- Wear protective clothing or cotton gloves under rubber gloves when using household products that may contain allergens or irritants.

When to Seek Medical Advice:

- If you experience severe itching, swelling, or if symptoms do not improve with self-care measures.
- If you notice signs of infection, such as increased redness, warmth, or pus, in the affected area.

Conclusion:

Contact allergic dermatitis can significantly impact daily life, but with proper identification of allergens and appropriate management strategies, symptoms can be effectively controlled. If you have any questions concerning contact allergic dermatitis or patch testing, please consult your dermatologist for further evaluation and guidance.

