

ALLERGIES AND SKIN CONDITIONS

Red, bumpy, scaly, itchy, swollen skin-any of these symptoms can signify an allergic skin condition. Allergic skin conditions can take several forms and are due to various causes.

HIVES

Hives are red, itchy, swollen areas of the skin that can range in size and appear anywhere on the body. Most common are acute cases of hives, where the cause is identifiable-often a viral infection, drug, food or latex. These hives usually go away spontaneously. Some people have chronic hives that occur almost daily for months to years.

In adults, reactions to medicines are a common cause of acute hives. Medications known to cause hives include aspirin, ibuprofen, high blood pressure, or pain-killers containing codeine or codeine-like drugs. Like all drug-induced hives, these reactions occur within only minutes to an hour of taking the drug. Adults can also develop hives after eating certain foods, including nuts, eggs, shellfish, soy, wheat or milk-the culprits in more than 90% of proven food-induced hives. In children, foods or viral infections such as a cold can trigger acute hives.

Pollen and plants are common allergens during the Spring



CONTACT DERMATITIS

When some substances come into contact with the skin, they may cause a rash called contact dermatitis.

Irritant contact dermatitis is often more painful than itchy, and is the result of an offending agent that actually damages the skin with which it comes into contact. The longer the skin is in contact-or the more concentrated the agent-the more severe the reaction. Water with added soaps and detergents is the

most common cause. Thus, it is not surprising that these reactions appear most often on the hands, and are frequently work-related.

Allergic contact dermatitis is best exemplified by the itchy, red, blistered reaction that almost everyone experiences after touching a poisonous plant. This allergic reaction is caused by a chemical in the plant. You can have a reaction from touching other items with which the plant has come into contact, including yard tools or the family dog. Unlike irritant contact dermatitis, which occurs within minutes of coming into contact with an offending agent, allergic contact dermatitis reactions can occur 24-48 hours after contact. Once a reaction starts, it takes 14-28 days to resolve, even with treatment.

Other agents that frequently cause allergic contact dermatitis include perfumes and fragrances, dyes, rubber products and cosmetics.

Treatment for allergic contact dermatitis depends on the severity of the symptoms. Cold soaks and compresses can offer relief for the acute, early, itchy blistered stage of the rash. To prevent the reaction from recurring, make sure to avoid contact with the offending substance.

ATOPIC DERMATITIS/ECZEMA

A common allergic reaction often affecting the face, elbows and knees is atopic dermatitis, also known as eczema. This red, scaly, itchy rash is usually seen in young infants, but can occur later in life. Eczema may at times ooze, or at times may look very dry.

Identifying the cause of the itch is essential in managing symptoms. Common triggers include overheating or sweating, and contact with irritants such as wool, pets or soaps. In older individuals, emotional stress can cause a flare-up. For some patients, usually children, food can also trigger eczema.

Preventing the eczema itch is the primary goal of treatment. The patient must stop scratching and rubbing the rash. Patients should remove all "irritants" that aggravate the condition from their environments. If a food is identified as the culprit, it must be eliminated from the diet.

WHEN TO CONTACT A DOCTOR

Whenever you have an unusual rash, make sure to contact your doctor, who will work with you to determine its cause-whether allergies, irritants, or another trigger. Most importantly, your physician and other health care providers can assist you in managing your skin condition.