

Tips for Protecting Your Skin When Frequently Washing Hands

This WorkCare Fact Sheet discusses the effects of frequent hand-washing and how to protect skin from irritation.

Good hand hygiene is one of the best ways to prevent spreading contagious illnesses like novel coronavirus (COVID-19) and the flu. But frequent hand-washing can cause dryness for anyone and trigger flare-ups for people with skin conditions.

When you have eczema, washing your hands often can exacerbate problems with dry and cracked skin, inflammation, oozing or crusting, itchiness and pain. Types of eczema include atopic dermatitis, contact dermatitis and dyshidrotic eczema.

What to Do

Good integrity of the skin barrier is an important aspect of hand hygiene. To help stop the spread of disease and protect your skin:

1. Wash your hands with moisturizing soap and warm water for 20 seconds. Bar soaps with high pH may



cause dryness. In general, antiseptic and anti-bacterial washes, which can be hard on the skin, are not needed for proper hand hygiene. Hand-sanitizer with at least 60 percent alcohol content is recommended when water is not available, especially after touching surfaces that may be contaminated.

2. Pat hands dry with a disposable paper towel or tissue. Rubbing hands dry is harder on the skin.
3. Once hands are mostly dry (skin may be slightly damp), apply a generous amount of moisturizer to coat hands and fingers. Creams and ointments nourish the skin better than water-based body lotions, provide a protective film barrier and fill in tiny cracks. Avoid products with retinol and other anti-aging serums, allergens or fragrances that may irritate the skin.

Other Tips

- Clean and/or sterilize containers used to hold soaps and moisturizers.
- Wear protective gloves when using antiseptic wipes and cleaning products
- Use a humidifier to help keep air and skin moist
- Apply cream or Vaseline and wear cotton gloves when sleeping

Eczema

In addition to using moisturizers, people with skin conditions who are prone to flare-ups from frequent hand-washing may be advised to use over-the-counter or prescription medications to help relieve symptoms, or phototherapy (ultraviolet light under medical supervision) to treat inflammation.