



# Handwashing Tips for People with Eczema and Other Skin Conditions

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If you are one of the 31.6 million people in the United States living with some form of eczema, continual handwashing and sanitizing to avoid spreading illness this season

might be a source of added stress and anxiety, as this can dry out your skin and cause eczema to flare. Sticking to a three-step routine can help – wash, dry, moisturize.

“Regular handwashing is important to remove dirt or soil and potentially contagious germs from your skin. For patients with eczema, it’s particularly important that they take care of their skin to not only maintain good skin hygiene, but to maintain control of their disease and avoid factors that may exacerbate their condition,” says Mark Levenberg, DO, FAAD who is a board-certified Dermatologist and Senior Medical Director, US Medical Affairs, at Pfizer Inc.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), regular handwashing is one of the most effective ways people can keep from getting sick[1] —and to help protect others from viruses such as COVID-19. But for those with eczema, hands may become irritated when washed too vigorously, dried too harshly or not moisturized properly, and potentially exacerbate or trigger a flare, says Dr. Levenberg. That’s why it’s important to stick with a handwashing routine that will keep hands as clean—and healthy—as possible.

Dr. Chudy Nduaka knows about this firsthand. Dr. Nduaka, who is Dermatology Team Leader, North America Medical Affairs at Pfizer Inc., has a 10-year-old daughter with eczema. Ever since she was little, she’s been instructed to care for her hands by washing, drying and moisturizing frequently, he says.

“Even before COVID-19, we had a rule that as soon as you walk into the house from school or from playing, you go straight to the bathroom and wash your hands and then use moisturizer,” he says. “I always make sure to remind my daughter to use moisturizer after every hand-wash.”

Because she’s so accustomed to the routine to care for her skin, Dr. Nduaka’s not worried about his daughter’s eczema right now, and neither is she. “She’s doing ok,” he says.

Dr. Levenberg shared the following advice for people with eczema on how to help keep their hands clean and healthy.

## **Use the right kind of cleanser**

People with eczema or other skin conditions should consider use of a gentle cleanser, which comes in bar and liquid form, says Dr. Levenberg. “Try to avoid certain ingredients, harsh detergents or with fragrance,” he says. “Those can potentially irritate the skin, and

these patients may be more susceptible to not only irritation, but an allergy from it as well.” He also recommends washing hands with lukewarm water, rather than hot or cold, to avoid further irritation.

## **Dry but don't over-dry**

Drying after every handwashing is important, because, according to the CDC, germs can transfer more easily to and from wet hands than from dry[2]. Dr. Levenberg recommends people with skin conditions gently pat their hands dry using a clean towel, disposable paper towel, or air dry if available. He says, “It’s important to try not to over-dry your hands and make sure not to rub your hands vigorously with a paper or cloth towel in a harsh way that may traumatize the skin.”

## **Always moisturize**

After light drying, immediately apply a moisturizer. Dr. Levenberg recommends products such as ointment or cream, which tend to be thicker and have better moisturizing properties. “Ointments and creams tend to be a little bit heavier than, for example a lotion, and may do a slightly better job to soften and seal in moisture in the skin,” he says.

## **Carry your own hand products with you**

People with eczema and other skin conditions may benefit from carrying travel-size versions of their cleanser and moisturizer with them when they leave the house, says Dr. Levenberg. That way, they can stick to the same routine with products they and their skin are accustomed to.

However, he adds, when that’s not an option, it’s okay to use products that are generally available at that time. “If faced with the choice of not washing your hands because you don’t have your personal cleanser with you or washing them with a suitable cleanser available at that moment , you should go ahead and wash your hands, ” he says. “You err on the side of caution and you do what’s best for yourself and for public health.”

Washing your hands frequently and correctly is always important. And right now, as people try and stop the spread of COVID-19, Dr. Levenberg says keeping your hands healthy is critical for overall health. “It may lower your risk for infection personally or spread of infection to others, and in general, when washing appropriately, allows you to

try and maintain healthy skin barrier function,” says Dr. Levenberg.

[1] CDC, “Show Me the Science: How to Wash Your Hands” (first sentence)

[2] CDC, “Show Me the Science: How to Wash Your Hands” (Dry your hands section)

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