

Eczema and Covid-19 hand hygiene precautions in schools

National Eczema Society has heard from many parents via our Helpline who are worried about the impact of using hand sanitisers and increased hand-washing when their children with eczema go back to school.

Eczema is a dry skin condition affecting 1 in 5 children in the UK. The main symptoms of hand eczema are dry, itchy and red skin affecting the whole hand, including the fingers. Other symptoms may include cracking, soreness and bleeding. In some cases, blisters may develop and fingers can become swollen.

If eczema is severe over a long time, the hands can become very painful, making it difficult to carry out day-to-day tasks such as doing up buttons, holding a pen or using a computer. Since the hands are a visible part of the body, children with hand eczema may also feel self-conscious.

Hand eczema can be triggered or worsened by factors that cause increased dryness of the skin, such as:

- Contact with hand sanitisers or harsh hand soaps. The skin of pre-pubescent children is especially vulnerable to these, as it is thinner than that of adults and generates less grease or sweat.
- Immersing the hands in water very frequently or for long periods of time.

We appreciate the importance of making every effort to ensure schools remain Covid-19-free. However, it is also important to make reasonable adjustments to ensure children with eczema are able to participate fully in school.

We urge schools to support the medical needs of children with eczema by:

- Allowing children to double-wash their hands instead of using hand sanitiser. Double hand-washing is washing with soap for 20 seconds and then re-washing immediately afterwards with emollient (medical moisturiser). The Covid-19 school re-opening guidance for all four UK nations says hand-washing is a legitimate (or even preferred) alternative to using hand sanitiser.
- Allowing children to bring their own soap in to use at school. Soap from a dispenser could contain ingredients that are harsh on the skin.
- Allowing children to wear clean 100% cotton gloves as an alternative to frequent hand-washing (for example, wearing gloves instead of washing hands on entering the building or moving between classrooms).
- Providing paper towels or allowing children to bring in their own clean hand towel every day. Hand dryers dry out the hands further.
- Accepting and supporting children who need to apply emollient at regular intervals throughout the day to manage their eczema. This is particularly important given children are expected to wash their hands more frequently than normal, and with soap (they would ordinarily use their emollient to wash with rather than soap).

Thank you for your assistance. We have provided references overleaf.

References relating to hand eczema and hand-washing:

- Capucci, S. et al, 'Impact of Atopic Dermatitis and Chronic Hand Eczema on Quality of Life Compared With Other Chronic Diseases' (2020) Dermatitis Journal:
https://journals.lww.com/dermatitis/Fulltext/2020/05000/Impact_of_Atopic_Dermatitis_and_Chronic_Hand.3.aspx
- Cork, M. J. et al, 'Epidermal Barrier Dysfunction in Atopic Dermatitis' (2009) Journal of Investigative Dermatology: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022202X15344420>
- Ibler K. S. et al, 'Exposures related to hand eczema: a study of healthcare workers' (2012) Contact Dermatitis: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22486567/> (relates to healthcare workers but describes important preventative effect of emollients)
- Mikkelsen C. S. et al, 'Is excessive hand hygiene during the COVID-19 pandemic causing an increase in hand eczema in Denmark?' (2020) BestPractice Nordic website article:
<https://bpno.dk/2020/05/06/is-excessive-hand-hygiene-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-causing-an-increase-in-hand-eczema-in-denmark/>
- WHO Guidelines on Hand Hygiene in Health Care: First Global Patient Safety Challenge Clean Care Is Safer Care (2009): <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK144008/> (relates to healthcare professionals but describes the damaging effect of detergents on the hands of people with eczema)

Guidance for schools on re-opening:

- UK government: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools>
- Northern Irish government: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-re-opening-school-guidance-new-school-day-revised>
- Scottish government: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-preparing-start-new-school-term-august-2020/>
- Welsh government: <https://gov.wales/operational-guidance-schools-and-settings-autumn-term-covid-19>