



AWARENESS

IS HYGIENE HURTING YOUR HANDS?

Practising proper hand hygiene is one of the best ways to limit the spread of infectious diseases, whether you wash your hands with soap and water or apply an alcohol-based sanitiser.

However, the practice isn't without drawbacks. You may have noticed the toll it can take on your skin.

According to Hand Hygiene Australia (HHA), hand hygiene is associated with two main forms of skin reaction:

- 1. irritant contact dermatitis** – this can be mild to severe and include dryness, irritation, itching, cracking and bleeding. It is mainly caused by frequent exposure to hand hygiene products, such as soaps and paper towels, and is more common among healthcare workers, cleaners, food handlers, hairdressers and those who wash their hands frequently. According to a 2008 paper in the *Australasian Journal of Dermatology*, those with hay fever, asthma and eczema are also more susceptible.
- 2. allergic contact dermatitis** – this type is rare and involves an allergy to a hand hygiene product ingredient, such as a fragrance or preservative.

Handy advice

So, how do you care for your hands when practising hand hygiene? Consider these tips from HHA and The Conversation academics:

- Opt for hand hygiene products containing skin emollients to soothe the skin.
- Use soap-free products to wash hands if you have eczema.

- Dry hands properly to eliminate excess moisture and residual soap, both of which can cause irritation. Don't forget to dry under rings, if worn, and be mindful that the type of paper towel used may contribute to skin irritation.
- Apply fragrance-free moisturisers often.
- Use alcohol-based hand sanitiser (when hands aren't visibly dirty) – it doesn't cause as much contact dermatitis as handwashing, based on research among healthcare workers.
- Just remember that proper handwashing still has an important place in hand hygiene. According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, it is preferred when preparing food, after using the toilet and when hands are visibly dirty, for example. "Soap and water work to remove all types of germs from hands, while sanitiser acts by killing certain germs on the skin," it states. The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) also warns that children should use hand sanitiser only under adult supervision and the product should be stored out of reach of youngsters and pets as it can be harmful if ingested.
- Don protective gloves for household chores, including gardening and dishwashing, and consider wearing cotton gloves over your moisturised hands when sleeping.

If hygiene is still hurting your hands, it's important to consult an appropriate health professional, such as your GP or a dermatologist.