

# Helping You to Prevent and Treat Skin Problems During COVID-19\*

We appreciate everyone on the front line at UNM Health doing everything they can to serve New Mexico, and taking care of our own is really important, especially now. We hope to help you prevent and treat any skin problems you might be experiencing from more frequent hand washing, using cleaning/sterilizers/sanitizers and using necessary personal protective equipment (PPE such as N95 respirators, surgical masks and gloves) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Causes of skin irritation

We know you need to clean your hands and skin a lot right now. But repeated washing and sanitizing your hands can cause some people to have burning, itching, redness, and irritation known as “contact dermatitis.” Frequently using cleansers, foams, gels, alcohol wipes, rubber gloves, elastic, etc. may also trigger this problem. Using a moisturizer frequently to the areas of the skin that are getting exposed can help protect your skin from developing rashes. Thicker creams and ointments (like petrolatum) are better at helping to protect your skin than pump lotions.

## Recognizing “contact dermatitis”

Most people with contact dermatitis will have itchy, dry, flaky, skin, rashes (skin gets pink or red, swollen, and warm or hot), burning, stinging, oozing or even blisters and sometimes hives or welts. If you have this kind of irritation for a long time, it can lead to thick, cracked, or darkened skin. That’s not permanent, but it can be avoided.

## Treating the problem

Contact dermatitis is often treated by board-certified dermatologists like those in our own Department of Dermatology. If the suggestions here do not help to resolve your problem, please see a provider. You can call our **UNMH Dermatology Clinic** at 505-272-6222 if needed. Please identify yourself as a UNM Employee if you call us.

- Mild rash - Moisturizer can help - use the thickest one you can and use it frequently after handwashing if possible and also after bathing/showering and at nighttime. Hand creams, oils, and ointments are the best and you should try to avoid fragrance added to them. If you are very itchy at nighttime, antihistamines by mouth (like Benadryl) can help, but usually make you drowsy. Over-the-counter hydrocortisone cream applied to the rash can also help.
- Severe rash - If you have a lot of discomfort, swelling, pain, your face or eyelids become swollen, or the rash covers a lot of your body, you may need evaluation and stronger treatment(s).

## Preventing skin damage from PPE and N95 respirator masks

The most important thing you can do to prevent irritation and breakouts is to keep your skin clean and well-moisturized when you are done with work and at home. You should wash your face using a pH-balanced non-comedogenic cleanser after wearing a mask and apply moisturizer designed for your face immediately after washing. Don't scrub! Some people will experience more acne or rosacea like breakouts because of mask use, so we recommend gentle skin care to prevent this. If you apply moisturizer to your face before coming to work, make sure to use it **AT LEAST** one hour before putting on your N95, as some products can interfere with how the mask can be re-sterilized and reused.

If you need to wear PPE for long periods of time at work, apply a cream or ointment such as petroleum/petrolatum to areas where the skin has been irritated once you are safely home. Keep the rest of your face and body well-moisturized as well. Dry, irritated skin may make it easier for bacteria and viruses to create infections in the skin. Consider skipping makeup, like foundation and concealers.

Because they need a tighter fit than other masks, wearing an N95 respirator for a long time can cause pressure and friction where the mask touches your skin, and this can possibly cause irritation and skin damage. A different N95 style mask might help with pressure points on the skin, but we know masks and PPE are in short supply and the hospital needs to change the ones available frequently.

One way to help prevent and heal skin damage from your mask is to use a liquid skin sealant/protectant on the skin areas affected by the mask touching it. It is very important that you let this kind of product dry fully before putting on your mask. Petroleum/ointments are **NOT** recommended for this reason, because they interfere with how your mask protects you. Because N95 respirators require a tight seal, you should not place **ANY** material or cushioning between the skin and the mask, as this makes your mask less effective and could increase your risk of contracting COVID 19. If you think you need to obtain a skin sealant, please let your unit director know, and/or contact the **UNMH Dermatology Clinic** at 505-272-6222 to be seen or for specific recommendations.

## Preventing skin damage from surgical or isolation masks

Elastic bands used to hold masks in place can result in skin damage from the frequent contact, friction or pressure on your ears and the skin behind them. Some people use headbands with buttons sewed on to hold masks in place. A barrier film wipe or thin foam dressing can also be used behind your ears before using a mask to help protect the skin. If your skin becomes very irritated or damaged, then a thin dressing can be used (the best ones for this are labeled "foam" or "hydrocolloid"). Wash your hands before and after removing any kind of protective dressing.

**Thank you again for everything you do.** We hope this has been helpful and we intend to continue to give you skin care suggestions and samples to keep everyone as comfortable and healthy as possible.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact us at: **HSC-Dermatology@salud.unm.edu**.

\* Adapted from the American Academy of Dermatology