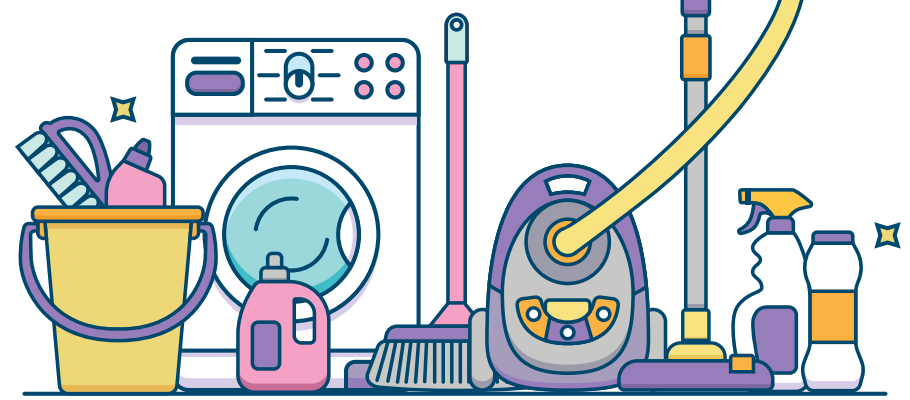


OUT, DAMNED SPOT!

Taking the (skin) irritation out of housework

For our Spring issue Alice Lambert, NES Director of Services, tackles the cleaning.



Housework probably isn't most people's favourite pastime, and people for whom the effect of household cleaning products near the skin is akin to Kryptonite are even more likely to put it off. However, before settling for squalor, it's worth thinking of ways to make the task more skin-friendly. After all, not only is it more pleasant to live in a reasonable state of cleanliness, regular cleaning plays an important part in removing ubiquitous emollient residue and dust particles, which can make eczema worse.

Over winter, especially, as we close the windows and turn up the thermostat, triggers such as moulds, pollens, pet dander and house-dust-mite droppings – trapped in the fabric of our homes, particularly in the carpets and soft furnishings – can build up and wreak unseen havoc. Spring is the perfect time to banish itch-inducing irritants – or at least reduce their number!

It's an unfortunate fact that household cleaners, detergents and sprays, whether in liquid form or as airborne particles, can irritate eczematous skin. In particular, they can cause a type of eczema called irritant contact dermatitis (ICD). People with a history of atopic eczema are more likely to have sensitive skin and are therefore more vulnerable to ICD. It's worth wearing protective gloves to perform housework, such as nitrile gloves with a cotton lining, or nitrile, rubber or vinyl gloves with

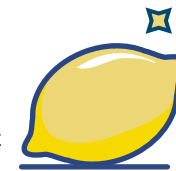
thin, 100% cotton gloves worn underneath. It's a good idea to wear gloves, whichever type of cleaning product you use, as even homemade and non-toxic products can make dry skin sting.

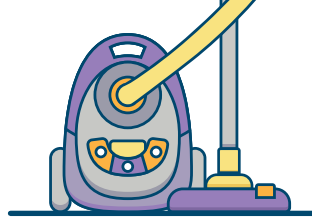
What are the alternatives to using cleaning products that contain eczema-exacerbating harsh chemicals and fragrances? One alternative is to employ someone to use such products for you – a cleaner. This may sound like a glib solution, and would obviously not be possible or desirable for everyone. However, it may be the best possible solution for people with severe eczema. A cheaper alternative is to make your own cleaning formulas using common, simple household ingredients. White vinegar (a natural disinfectant and stain remover) and bicarbonate of soda (when mixed with a liquid this forms a powerful cleaner to tackle grease, dirt and problem stains) top the list of DIY cleaning favourites. Another alternative is to use plant-based, environmentally friendly products, which many people with eczema find less irritating on the skin than major brands. It's important to note that in households where several people are using emollients – particularly ointments – cleaning products containing more powerful chemicals (such as bleach) will probably be necessary to prevent the blockage of drains and plugholes. Liquid you can pour down the drain or a cream-type cleaner are preferable – but avoid sprays.

Scrubbing up well - Tips

Here are some tips for house-cleaning in general and for making your own cleaning formulas:

- Use a damp cloth instead of a feather duster to clean hard surfaces and ornaments – if indeed feather dusters are still used by anyone other than maids in 1920s period dramas! Damp dusting is preferable to dry dusting as it prevents dust from being transferred from one place to another.
- Steam-cleaning is a particularly good, skin-friendly method for cleaning wooden or tiled floors, bathroom tiles, non-plastic baths and sinks, and hard surfaces. While they can be expensive, the kinds with different accoutrements can be used for many different cleaning tasks.
- To remove mildew and mould without a steam cleaner, mix one part lemon juice (citric acid is a natural bleach, disinfectant and deodoriser) with one part bicarbonate of soda. Apply and leave for 1–2 hours, then rinse off. Scrub or steam-clean tile grouts (spaces between tiles) frequently.
- For a handy surface cleaner, mix 250ml of white vinegar with 250ml of water in a 500-ml spray bottle.
- Keep the house as well-ventilated as possible. Good ventilation helps prevent mildew and mould. Don't put the heating on unnecessarily – and be aware of condensation.
- If mopping the floor, use 8 tablespoons of white vinegar in 3 litres of hot water. Don't worry, the vinegar odour will dissipate as it dries!
- There are divergent and strongly held views on how to clean a washing-machine and stop it smelling. Regular (once a month or so) cleaning of the washing machine is particularly important for people who use emollient ointment, as the build-up of ointment residue from clothes and bedding may damage the rubber seal. We suggest running a maintenance cycle with 300–500g of soda crystals in an empty machine on the hottest setting. Take care not to let these touch your skin, and close the door quickly to avoid fumes. Alternatively, use a generous amount of detergent on the hottest setting and do an extra rinse to get rid of any residue.





- Keep the washing machine and detergent dispenser doors open after doing a wash to let them air.
- To clean a dirty carpet, sprinkle bicarbonate of soda liberally on the carpet and let it sit overnight or longer. Next, sweep up as much as you can with a brush, and vacuum up the rest.
- Standard vacuum cleaners tend to beat into the carpet and stir up dust. A vacuum cleaner that keeps dust within the machine (i.e. one that has a low-dust exhaust) is preferable.
- Some people find that a vacuum cleaner that uses disposable dust bags is preferable to a bag-less vacuum cleaner, as it involves less exposure to dust.

- We recommend using a high-efficiency vacuum cleaner with excellent filtration and suction power – possibly labelled as suitable for allergy (i.e. with special filters for any allergen particles) or, if you have pets, labelled as suitable for effectively removing pet hair.
- To clean the oven, heat it gently and wait for it to cool down. When the oven is just warm, add enough water to a cup of bicarbonate of soda to make a thin paste. Apply the paste thinly to the oven walls. Using a spray bottle filled with vinegar, spray the vinegar onto the bicarbonate of soda on the oven walls. Let the mixture sit for an hour or so. Then take a damp cloth and gently wipe off the mixture. A steam cleaner could also be used for this task.

'All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand'



Hectic lifestyles can make it difficult to find time for housework. A reduction in time spent on cleaning may be linked to the increasing popularity of home fragrances.

It's tempting to mask a lack of cleaning – or indeed a lack of a 'chemical-y clean' smell from using fragrance-free products – by introducing beguiling aromas into the home via air freshener sprays, diffusers or scented candles.

Unfortunately, home fragrances of all varieties have the potential to irritate eczematous skin and cause headaches and respiratory difficulties, especially for people with asthma.

An alternative to an air freshener is the good old childhood winter craft staple – an orange

studded with cloves. 'Orange pomander balls' have been a Christmas or New Year's custom in England since the 17th century, but they can be made throughout the year. Not only do they emit a fresh, comforting aroma, making them is a fun craft activity for adults and children alike.

Wear gloves when handling oranges, or make sure you wash your hands as soon as possible after handling them and apply an emollient.

A final word on indoor fragrances: people often erroneously conflate cleanliness with pungent chemical-y odours – it is possible for a house to be perfectly clean and have a neutral smell!



Useful websites

The choice and use of cleaning equipment and products can make a difference. Below is a list of websites from which you can buy or find stockists that sell household cleaning products that some people with eczema have found less likely to irritate their skin, plus cloths, gloves, vacuum cleaners and steam cleaners. The brand Ecover proved a particular favourite among our Facebook followers, and Method and e-cloth were also recommended. Be aware that some of the household cleaners may contain fragrance. Several Facebook followers emphasised the importance of wearing gloves when carrying out any cleaning job, and cleaning formulas made from bicarbonate of soda and vinegar were also mentioned positively. The latter products are easily obtainable from any supermarket.

Cleaning products

- e-cloth (varieties of cloths to use with water only): www.e-cloth.com
- Ecover – household cleaners (multi-action, bathroom, oven and hob, window and glass, and limescale remover), washing-up liquid and dishwasher tablets: www.ecover.com
- Faith in Nature – household cleaners (multi-surface and bathroom), washing-up liquid and dishwasher gel: www.faithinnature.co.uk
- Greenscents – household cleaners (multi-surface, floor, toilet, polish) and washing-up liquid: www.greenscents.co.uk
- Kinn Living – household cleaners (bathroom, floor, kitchen) and washing-up liquid: www.kinn-living.com
- Method – household cleaners (multi-surface, bathroom, floor, specialty surface) and washing-up liquid: www.methodproducts.co.uk

Gloves

- Bizzybee – latex-free gloves: www.bizzybee.co.uk
- Spontex – nitrile gloves with cotton flock lining: www.spontex.co.uk
- JustGloves – powder-free nitrile and vinyl gloves: www.justgloves.co.uk

Vacuum cleaners

- Nilfisk (bagged): <https://consumer.nilfisk.co.uk>
- Miele (bagged): www.miele.co.uk
- Sebo (bagged): <https://sebo.co.uk>

Steam cleaners

- BISSELL (hand-held): www.bisselldirect.co.uk
- Shark (steam mop): www.sharksteam.co.uk
- Kärcher (range of steam cleaners): www.kaercher.com
- H2O HD Steam Mop – Currys (steam mop and hand-held): www.currys.co.uk