Allergic contact dermatitis

Allergic contact dermatitis can be caused through contact with certain substances in footwear. Common culprits include rubber, chrome-tanned leather, dyes (e.g. para-phenylenediamine and para-aminoazobenzene) and components of glues (e.g. colophony and para-tertiary-butylphenol formaldehyde resin) used to hold the footwear together. Metals such as nickel and cobalt may also cause footwear-related allergy, especially in metal-capped or metal-reinforced shoes, as well as shoes with metal buckles, metal eyelets for the laces, or other metal decorative parts that may come into contact with the skin. Occasionally, sachets in shoe boxes contain an anti-mould agent such as DMF, which can permeate leather and act as a sensitisier, resulting in footwear contact allergy. Unfortunately, socks offer little protection if you are allergic to chrome-tanned leather – if the feet perspire, sweat may cause the chromates to leach out onto the skin.

Shoe-related allergic contact dermatitis should clear quickly once you no longer come into contact with the allergen to which you are sensitive. Patch testing is used to detect the relevant allergen(s). The best way to prevent problems from reoccurring is to avoid all footwear containing the allergen in question.

When you’re imagining traditional Dutch clogs and grimacing, think again! It’s possible to obtain stylish dogs – that is, footwear with a wooden base and a vegetable-tanned leather upper. Shoes made from alternative materials to leather are available from shops specialising in vegan footwear, and some high-street shops offer a vegan range. If you also have a glue allergy, look for footwear where the upper has been stapled or stitched into place rather than glued.

Tips

Footwear should fit well. If the skin on your feet, ankles or legs is becoming irritated, check first to see if there’s something physically wrong with the shoe/sandal/boot and make sure it’s the correct size. There can be a tendency for sandals in particular to rub if they are not fitted correctly.

Footwear should be permeable to the air, and kept clean and dry (weather permitting!) to reduce the possibility of fungal and bacterial infections, which thrive in warm, damp conditions.

Alternating different pairs of shoes and changing socks daily can help to avoid the build-up of moisture inside the shoe.

Shoes with removable insoles are helpful as the insoles can easily be removed, washed and dried out. Avoid deodorising insoles and shoe sprays, as the fragrance (parfum) might cause irritation.

Plastic, rubber, nylon or vinyl ‘uppers’ (that is, the entire part of the shoe that covers the foot) tend to make the feet hot, sweaty and itchy if worn for long periods, so should be avoided.

When at home, open sandals or bare feet tend to be the best options. However, if you are atopic, eczema on the soles of your feet may be triggered by environmental irritants such as grass, pollen and animal dander, so be careful if you walk barefoot in the garden, or in a pet-inhabited house!

Air shoes regularly and don’t leave them in their boxes with sachets containing dimethyl fumarate (DMF), a biocide used to prevent the growth of mould (see below).

Pompholyx eczema

Pompholyx eczema, a blistering type of eczema, is most commonly found on the hands and soles of the feet. Pompholyx eczema is often stimulated by fungal foot infection or excess sweating, so it’s important to avoid all types of footwear likely to cause sweating – i.e. plastic and rubber shoes, or trainers.
Leather shoe linings are preferable to synthetic for foot pompholyx; however, it may be worth considering the possibility of sensitivity to chrome, rubber or chemicals used in shoe adhesives. If you think you might be sensitive to these materials, ask your doctor about patch testing. Alternatively, absorbent insoles can help, especially ones that can be frequently washed and dried. Insoles can be washed with lukewarm water and a mild detergent or soap, and left to air dry. Avoid leaving them to soak or allowing them to absorb too much water. They can be damaged if they’re washed in a washing machine or dried in a dryer. Insoles made from carbon fibre or cork have been found to suit some people with pompholyx eczema.

Sock it to us

Some of our Facebook users reported that socks and tights proved more of a problem for them than shoes. For the best chances of comfort, wear tights, socks and stockings made from 100% cotton, silk or bamboo. Generally speaking, cotton tends to be the go-to, most reliably comfortable material for eczema sufferers. Avoid synthetic fibres as they are less absorbent and do not allow the skin to ‘breathe’. Seamless socks, or ‘socks with hand-linked toes’ as they are often described, ensure that the socks do not cause irritation through wrinkling or bunching up. Socks specifically marketed at people with diabetes are another option for people with eczema – not only are they seamless, they also have elastic-free cuffs. However, it can be difficult to find them in 100% cotton.

In response to our question about the types of footwear they found most comfortable, in addition to recommending going barefoot where possible, several Facebook users mentioned Converse shoes. The classic Converse shoe is the Chuck Taylor All Star – a casual, flat rubber-soled shoe in high-top or low-top style, made with a thin layer of cotton canvas. Most of the other types of Converse shoe available have rubber soles and uppers made from canvas, leather or suede. Canvas sneakers may be the best Converse option for people with eczema, although the rubber sole is best avoided by people with a rubber sensitivity. Shoes containing Gore-Tex were also recommended – they allow for moisture evaporation.

Putting your best foot forward

It may take people with eczema more time (and research) than people without eczema to find suitable shoes, but with an ever-increasing range and availability of footwear made from non-traditional materials out there, no one should have to settle for discomfort. The choice of shoes made from non-traditional materials isn’t limited to plain, dinky, overly casual or eccentric-looking footwear, either. Many of the outlets opposite stock a variety of stylish boots, shoes and sandals for women and men – footwear ranging from athletic to casual to dressy. A range of children’s boots, shoes and sandals is available too. We would love to know whether there are any particular brands or types of footwear that have worked particularly well for you.

Useful websites

Please be aware that not all the components of all the footwear in the websites listed below will be suitable for everyone with eczema. If you’re allergic to multiple materials, check with the manufacturers before buying a particular item that it does not contain the materials to which you’re allergic. All of the websites opposite (with the exception of Amazon) contain the brand or manufacturer’s contact details.

SOCKS

Protect It – diabetes and arthritis-friendly socks:
www.protectitsocks.co.uk
Amazon – men’s 100% cotton seamless socks:
www.amazon.co.uk/Black-Socks-Cotton-Seamless-VCA%2C%AE/dp/B00F99B1RS
Amazon – women’s 100% cotton seamless socks:
www.amazon.co.uk/Original-VCA%2C%AE-Womens-Cotton-seamless/dp/B00WR9TY9U

ADULTS’ VEGAN/VEGETARIAN BOOTS, SHOES AND SANDALS

Free from chrome-tanned leather

Beyond Skin – range of dressy and casual shoes and boots for women (at time of writing, men’s collection not yet available):
www.beyond-skin.com
Dr Martens, vegan range – mostly unisex boots and shoes for adults:
www.drmartens.com/uk/c/vegan
Free Rangers – women and men’s boots, shoes and sandals:
www.freerangers.co.uk
Green Shoes, vegan range – women and men’s boots, shoes and sandals:
www.greenshoes.co.uk/pages/how-to-buy/vegan-range/200
Guat Shoes, both leather and vegan options available – women and men’s boots, shoes and sandals:
www.guatshoes.co.uk
Vegetarian Shoes – women and men’s boots, shoes, sandals and trainers:
www.vegetarian-shoes.co.uk
Will’s Vegan Shoes & Accessories Co – women and men’s shoes and boots:
https://wills-vegan-shoes.com

CHILDREN’S VEGAN/VEGETARIAN BOOTS, SHOES AND SANDALS

Free from chrome-tanned leather

Green Shoes, vegan range:
www.greenshoes.co.uk/pages/how-to-buy/vegan-range/200
Happy Little Soles, vegan range:
www.happy littlesoles.co.uk
Will’s Vegan Shoes & Accessories Co – children’s boots, shoes and sandals:
https://wills-vegan-shoes.com

INSOLES

CARBON FIBRE

Shoe insoles:
www.shoeinsoles.co.uk/carbon-fibre-insoles.html
Health and Care:
www.healthandcare.co.uk/carbon-fibre-insoles.html

CORK

Shoe insoles:
www.shoeinsoles.co.uk/shoe-string-cork-insoles.html
The Insole Company:
www.theinsolecompany.co.uk/products/Insoles/Full%20Soles.php

LEATHER

Shoe insoles:
www.shoeinsoles.co.uk/leather-insoles.html
Health and Care:
www.healthandcare.co.uk/leather_insoles.html

ATHLETIC/CASUAL SHOES

Converse – women, men and children’s trainers/sneakers:
www.converse.com/uk

CHILDREN’S GORE-TEX SHOES AND BOOTS, INCLUDING SCHOOL SHOES

Clarks – boys’ – www.clarks.co.uk/Boys/GORE-TEX%2C%AE-Boots/c/b12
Clarks – girls’ – www.clarks.co.uk/Girls/GORE-TEX%2C%AE-Boots/c/g13

CHILDREN’S WOODEN CLOGS

Containing leather

Lotta from Stockholm:
www.lottafromstockholm.co.uk/clogs/kids-clogs.html

HIKING BOOTS AND SHOES

Merrell, vegan, ventilated shoe and Gore-Tex shoe ranges – women and men’s hiking boots and shoes, smaller range for children:
www.merrell.com/UK/en_GB/home
Vegetarian Shoes, unisex adult hiking boots and shoes:
www.vegetarian-shoes.co.uk/specialist/hiking__safety_boots/10032_0c.html

WOODEN CLOGS WITH VEGETABLE-TANNED LEATHER

Free from chrome-tanned leather

Lotta from Stockholm – men’s clogs:
www.lottafromstockholm.co.uk/clogs/mens-clogs.html
Lotta from Stockholm – range of different women’s styles:
www.lottafromstockholm.co.uk/clogs.html