



## Sun-Related Skin Condition Triggered by Chemicals in Certain Plants, Fruits

**DEAR MAYO CLINIC:** What is phytophotodermatitis? How can you tell the difference between this disorder and other sun-related skin conditions?

**ANSWER:** Phytophotodermatitis is a skin condition that happens as a result of sensitivity to chemicals in certain plants and fruits. The reaction to those chemicals is triggered when the affected skin is exposed to sunlight or other ultraviolet light. Phytophotodermatitis is different from most other sun-related skin conditions because instead of affecting all areas of skin exposed to the sun, it affects only the spots that the chemicals touch directly.

The chemicals that cause phytophotodermatitis are found most commonly in wild parsnip, wild dill, wild parsley, buttercups and citrus fruits, especially limes. When these chemicals get on your skin and then are exposed to ultraviolet light, a chemical reaction occurs that often looks like a sunburn, or it may develop as a red, itchy patch, similar to eczema. The skin may also blister. Eventually, the affected area, which feels like a mild to severe sunburn, may turn brown. This discoloration can sometimes last for months.

Phytophotodermatitis typically affects people who frequently run, walk, hike or bike in wooded areas or other wild places where the plants that cause this condition grow. Chefs, bartenders and other people who regularly handle a variety of citrus fruits also may be at an increased risk of developing phytophotodermatitis.

Most sun-related skin conditions, such as sunburn, sun allergy and polymorphous light eruption, affect all areas of skin that are exposed to sunlight. But phytophotodermatitis is different. Because its reaction is triggered specifically by chemicals on the skin, only the skin affected by those toxins reacts when exposed to the light. That means the reaction may appear in unusual patterns of streaks, drips and, sometimes, as fingerprints or handprints. The handprint formation is common on children who have had adults with the chemicals on their hands apply sunscreen to them or otherwise touch their skin.

Due to the pattern of its skin reaction, phytophotodermatitis can be difficult to diagnose. Many people think it's poison ivy, poison oak or poison sumac. In the case of children with handprint-shaped patches, it may even be mistaken for child abuse. An experienced dermatologist can usually make an accurate diagnosis, though, through the combination of a careful physical exam and questions about when and how the skin reaction appeared.

Phytophotodermatitis goes away gradually on its own. Treatment for phytophotodermatitis typically requires only self-care measures, such as soothing the affected skin with a cool, wet cloth. If the area is persistently painful, or if blisters are severe, talk to your doctor.

To prevent phytophotodermatitis, wash your hands after handling any citrus fruits, particularly

limes. You should also wear long pants and long sleeves when you're in the woods or other wild areas. When you come inside, wash any areas of your skin that weren't covered.

Also, be careful when you make a campfire. Use only firewood, and never put wild plants into a fire. If wild parsnip or other plants that contain phytophotodermatitis-causing chemicals are burned, those chemicals can be dispersed into the air and come in contact with any exposed body surface. Then, if you go into the sunshine before you take a shower or bath, all areas of skin touched by the chemicals will react, resulting in an extensive rash.

Fortunately, because the chemicals responsible for phytophotodermatitis quickly come off with soap and water, most cases can be easily prevented by carefully washing your skin any time you think you've come into contact with the plants or fruits that cause this condition. - Dawn Davis, M.D., Dermatology, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn.

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## DEAR PHARMACIST

By Suzy Cohen, R.Ph.

**QUESTION:** You've said that stress causes higher levels of the hormone cortisol and that causes weight gain and disease. I have lost my home and dealing with the emotional fall out and the anguish of scaling down and moving. How can I control cortisol as I deal with this grief? My good health is all I have left. --M.L., Palm Beach, Florida

**ANSWER:** Sorry about your loss. Cortisol is produced by your adrenal glands and helps regulate the speed at which you turn food into fuel, and hence your blood sugar levels; it supports immune function and bone health. It's not a bad guy unless it gets too high, or flat-lines after prolonged periods of stress.

Stress is by far the number one reason that cortisol levels become elevated. Excessive amounts cause you to hold weight in your mid-section (think belly fat). High cortisol means more infections and higher incidence of hypertension, osteoporosis (brittle bones), reflux, diabetes, cancer, heart disease and stroke. Stress can make you terribly sick by upping your cortisol hormone. Conventional medicine's answer is usually a benzodiazepine-type of tranquilizer such as Xanax, Valium or Ativan which provides a quick fix.

Supplements help you with the stress response better because they don't cause addiction, and they can lower cortisol unlike drugs. Reducing cortisol is good for your waist line. Even if you can't eliminate stress, and have to go through it, you can still improve your body's response to the stress. This is important. Make the word "adaptogen" your best friend because adaptogenic herbs are your best solution to stress. Four of my favorite are ashwagandha, gin-

geng, rhodiola and gotu kola.

Well-designed scientific studies have revealed undeniable stress-relieving qualities. You should not need all four, just pick one to try based on its other properties and potential side effects. Ask your doctor if it's right for you before buying them at the health food store. Google these herbs to learn about them. It's okay to switch them out every few months. Adaptogens often take a few weeks to begin working.

Ashwagandha improves endurance, provides instant calm, fights fatigue, reduces inflammation and enhances sex drive. Panax ginseng also enhances sex drive, while improving energy levels, mental focus and well-being. Rhodiola, which thrives in freezing cold Siberia, improves stamina, cognitive function, melancholy and ability to cope. Gotu kola herb offers a mild, relaxing sense of virtual euphoria. Take Gotu kola when you need it to kick back and relax, the way you might enjoy a glass of wine. Speaking of alcohol, this may be an effective stress-reducer but it's going to make a mess of your cortisol over time. I'd prefer you drink green tea, in most people that provides instant calm.

Treat yourself to massage. In 2005 University of Miami researchers reviewed some scientific studies and found that a single massage can reduce cortisol levels by an amazing 31 percent! Yoga is another way to find peace and calm. More meditation means less medication.

*(This information is not intended to treat, cure or diagnose your condition. Suzy Cohen is the author of "The 24-Hour Pharmacist." For more information, visit [www.DearPharmacist.com](http://www.DearPharmacist.com))*

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