Dry, cracked hands: treatment and prevention

In addition to pocket-sized hand sanitizer, I recently got my kids pocket-sized moisturizer to help their dry, cracked hands.

Between diligent handwashing and falling temperatures in Pennsylvania, we are experiencing annoying, itchy skin changes. We've blogged about this before-Dr. Lai and I are used to washing our hands twice for every patient we see in the office-once before examining them and once again afterward. I have a jar of moisturizer on my desk that I frequently dip into between patients. Now I remind my kids to do the same between hand washings.

Here are some remedies to help treat dry, cracked hands:

- Petroleum jelly, such as Vasoline or Aquaphor, works great to moisturize and heal cracks in the skin. Apply at bedtime. Ointments are greasy, so during the day your kids might prefer using a fragrance-free moisturizing cream such as CeraVe or Aveeno.
- If itchy, add hydrocortisone 1% ointment to your kids' daily or twice daily hand-care regime. Sometimes, for kids with underlying eczema, pediatricians prescribe a stronger type of hydrocortisone to help with more severe skin cracking and itching from dryness. Ointment tends to sting less than cream.

- Mix equal parts of moisturizing ointment and hydrocortisone ointment, smear, and put socks over hands to lock in moisture. This works best as a bedtime routine to help decrease the subconscious scratching and picking that occurs during sleep.

- Also stop the itch by giving your child an oral antihistamine such as cetirizine (Zyrtec).

Of course, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Here are ways to prevent dry, cracked hands:

- Encourage your children to wear gloves or mittens when outside in cold weather. This shields skin from drying out.
- Apply moisturizer to hands before leaving the house every day.
- Keep moisturizer next to all sinks in the house to remind your kids to moisturize after handwashing. Their hands do not have to be completely dry before applying the moisturizer- in fact, moisturizing cream can better get into skin when skin is damp.
- In contrast, if using hand sanitizer, wait until the skin is dry before applying the moisturizer.
- Wash hands in cool or lukewarm water, not hot water. Just like hot water washes oil off a frying pan, hot water will wash off your skin’s natural oils and leave them drier.

Remember, lizard skin is for lizards, not for your children!

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