Nickel Allergic Contact Dermatitis

Nickel, part of certain metals, is found in many products. Many chrome-plated objects contain enough nickel to produce a reaction in sensitive people. Stainless steel also contains nickel, but it is bound in such a way that makes stainless steel safe for most nickel-sensitive individuals.

Earrings containing nickel can cause earlobe dermatitis, a very common problem in people allergic to nickel. Needles used to pierce ears may also trigger this. Only sterile stainless needle should be used for piercing. After piercing wear only nickel-free of 14K gold earrings for at least the first three weeks.

Clothing accessories made of nickel (buckles, zippers, buttons and metal clips) can cause dermatitis. Nickel-sensitive people can substitute leather-covered buckles or may cover the back of snaps on pants with a piece of denim fabric.

Sweating increases dermatitis in nickel-sensitive people. In the summer, items containing nickel can cause an itchy, prickly sensation within 15 to 20 minutes of touching perspiring skin. A rash may appear within a day or two. These same items can be worn for several hours without any symptoms, if perspiration is not present.

Causes

- Nickel allergy may develop at any age. Once you become allergic to nickel, you’re likely to have the allergy for many years. Ear piercing sometimes initiated nickel allergy.
- Some persons are highly allergic to nickel and may get a rash from even brief contact with nickel-containing metals, while others break out only after a long period of skin contact with nickel.
- Nickel allergy is especially common in women. It often prevents them from wearing jewelry. All jewelry contains nickel; however, there’s less nickel in 14 or 18-karat gold jewelry than in inexpensive costume jewelry.

Treatment

- It is essential to avoid contact with nickel-containing metals.
- Test your mental items to see if they contain nickel. Obtain a nickel-testing kit from your dermatologist or pharmacist. The kits consists of two small bottles of clear fluid; one contains dimethylglyoxime and the other ammonium hydroxide. When mixed together in the presence of nickel, a pink color results. Apply a drop from each bottle to a Q-tip and rub it on the metal item to be tested – first try it on a 10 cent coin. Observe the color on the Q-tip. If it remains clear, the item has no free nickel and will not cause dermatitis. If it is pink it contains nickel and may cause problems if the metal touches your skin. The chemicals will not harm your jewelry.
- Necklaces, necklace fasteners, earrings, bracelets, watch straps and rings may contain nickel. “Nickel-free” and gold (14 karat or more) jewelry should be safe. Nine karat gold and white gold both contain nickel. Plastic covers for earrings studs can be obtained. Coating the stud with nail polish is not recommended.
- Metal zippers, bra hooks, suspender clips, hair-pins, buttons, studs, eyeglass frames etc. are likely to contain nickel. Use substitutes made of plastic, coated or painted metal or some other material.
- Consider lipstick holders, powder compacts, handbag catches, cigarette lighters, razors, keys, key rings, pocket knives, pens as potential causes of dermatitis.
- Cupboard handles, kitchen utensils, cutlery, toaster, metal teapots, scissors, needles, pins, thimble, vacuum cleaners, torches, bath plugs… may all contain nickel. Choose tools with plastic handles. Stainless steel does not usually cause dermatitis unless it is nickel-plated.
- Silver coins are composed of cupro-nickel. Cashiers with nickel allergy may develop hand dermatitis from this source. Wear gloves to handle money or pay with a credit card or check.
- Nickel dermatitis may be aggravated by contact with paper clips, typewriter keys, instruments, metal fragments from a lathe or chain saw.