

Taking care of your skin

It might surprise you to learn that our skin is the biggest organ in the body. Skin is in fact, constantly hard at work to keep us healthy. As well as providing a protective layer against bacteria and harmful ultraviolet light, our skin helps us conserve water as well as playing a major role in keeping us at the right temperature by allowing us to sweat. Skin also helps us absorb sunlight which is needed to make vitamin D. An assignment in a hot country can place great demands on your skin, so it's not surprising that people run into skin problems overseas. See our [sunburn](#) sheet for some tips on keeping your skin healthy. Meanwhile, here are some common skin problems you might encounter, with some advice on what to do about them:

Prickly heat

Red, itchy spots occurring in clusters on the sweatiest parts of the body. Common in people arriving in hotter climates from more temperate zones, this occurs due to an accumulation of sweat droplets under the skin. In an ideal environment with adequate running water, take cool showers and wear loose, cotton clothing. Calamine lotion or oral antihistamines can be used to relieve the itch as well as talcum powder with zinc oxide. Sufferers should find the rash subsides as they acclimatise.

Fungal infections

Fungal infections of the skin are more common in hot countries as they love a warm, sweaty environment. Fungal rashes are common under the arms or in the groin, where they appears as a pink, slightly itchy rash with a well-demarcated border. Foot infections are also common, also known as athlete's foot - you may find you have an itchy, flaky rash between your toes. Clotrimazole ('Canesten') cream will get rid of most of these if used regularly for a couple of weeks. Tea tree oil has an antiseptic effect and may also be helpful, as long as it doesn't irritate your skin. You can prevent fungal infections by showering regularly (if this is possible in your environment) and wearing cotton clothing to try and minimise sweat. Try to allow your feet to get some air by wearing open sandals and avoid wearing trainers if you can.

Cuts and scratches

It's easy to forget to clean a cut, but skin infections are more common when you're working in a hotter environment or where hygiene conditions are poor. Clean the wound with running water and apply some antiseptic such as iodine or antiseptic cream. Wounds should be kept clean and dry, so cover them if you're out and about. If the wound is minor, then it's fine to let some air get to it when you're back in your room.

If the wound starts leaking yellow fluid or develops a red, warm area around the edge, then it may be developing infection. Seek medical advice if you can. If you can't, the correct antibiotic is flucloxacillin (erythromycin for the penicillin allergic).

Tropical ulcers are painful sores which may develop from what seems like a small scratch or insect bite. Prevent them happening by cleaning wounds. Treatment is the same as for infected wounds.

Insect Bites and stings

It's tempting to scratch itchy mosquito bites but this only makes them more inflamed. Scratching can also introduce secondary infection. An anti-itch cream such as Eurax or hydrocortisone 1% will

calm them down while sodium bicarbonate made into a paste can also provide relief from itchiness. Alternatively, antihistamines will dampen down the allergic reaction.

Eczema

If you're an eczema sufferer, then it will probably get better if you're going to a warmer environment, however you might be one of the unlucky ones who get worse. Heat, wind and very dry environments can dehydrate the skin and worsen eczema. Humidity can help to moisturise your skin, however it can also increase the risk of your eczema becoming infected. If you have eczema, you might want to consider the following points in order to keep things in order:

- Aim to keep your skin cool and well moisturised. Natural fibres such as cotton and linen are best for cooling as they allow your skin to breathe. If you have widespread eczema, your skin may struggle to sweat effectively, so try not to let it overheat. Greasy moisturisers may be uncomfortable during the daytime and create a 'frying effect' on your skin, so stick to lighter creams when it's hot.
- If you have an allergic (contact) type of eczema, then you may react to the ingredients in some sun creams. Try testing yourself with a small patch of sun cream and waiting 24 hours to see how your skin reacts. Apply your regular emollient (moisturiser) about 30 minutes before applying your sunscreen. This stops the 2 products diluting one another.
- Salt water can make eczema worse but some may find their eczema improves. Chlorine from pool water can also be irritating. An oily, barrier-type of emollient can help protect the skin during swimming. Aim to shower afterwards if you can and apply another layer of emollient.
- Remember to take enough supplies with you, even if your eczema is well controlled. It's best to take your usual maintenance treatments plus something for flare-ups if you're prone to those. If you've had problems with eczema becoming infected in the past, ask your doctor if you can have a standby course of antibiotics. Flucloxacillin is the usual antibiotic for infected eczema, provided you're not allergic to its main ingredient which is penicillin.

Psoriasis

Psoriasis almost always gets better in the sun. Actually, UV light therapy is a recognised treatment for psoriasis. It may be tempting to soak up some sun rays onto your psoriasis but remember the risk of **sunburn** and the long term risk of skin cancer is likely to cause you more problems in the long term. It's best to cover up with light materials such as cotton or linen. Most people with psoriasis are using some kind of moisturiser - try to use a lighter, non-greasy one in the day time and leave the greasy ones for the evening.

Psoriasis doesn't usually become infected (unlike eczema) but it can suddenly flare up and become worse. If you're prone to this, then remember to take your standby treatment with you, as well as a supply of your usual creams. Flare ups often happen for no reason but there are a few things worth looking out for that may well make things worse, namely stress, alcohol or having a very high fever. Very occasionally the antimalarial chloroquine can be to blame behind worsening psoriasis.

A small number of people with psoriasis have to take drugs to suppress the immune system in order to manage their skin. If this applies to you, seek medical advice before you think about travelling.

Further Information & Guidance

More information can be found in: 'The Traveller's Good Health Guide', Ted Lankester; 3rd Edition 2006.

InterHealth's Travel health Advice Centre (THAC) is available to travelwellplan subscribers. Please visit our website: <http://www.interhealth.org.uk/our-services-travelwell-plan-travel-health-advice-centre.html> to find out more.

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