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NICKEL ALLERGIES

How this lowly metal drives millions of North Americans into a frenzy of itching

SCRATCH, scratch, scratch. It's a sticky summer evening and I'm absently rubbing some tiny red bumps under the clasp of my watch. Poison ivy, perhaps? I apply calamine lotion and think no more of it until I notice the same rash on my abdomen, where my jeans button happens to sit. I'd known for 20 years that earrings made my earlobes itchy, but why were my watch and jeans suddenly a problem?

The culprit is nickel, the most common metal allergen. Sensitization in one place is likely to cause reactions elsewhere on the body. It's a chronic condition, so you are stuck with it for life. But at least you are in good company: nickel allergy affects up to one in seven women. That means around two million Canadian sisters suffer along. Of course, nickel allergy affects men as well.

A nickel reaction is generally an itchy, red, bumpy eczema rash where something containing the metal, such as a belt buckle, necklace, watch, ring or a pair of earrings, sits against the skin.

The incidence of nickel allergy has grown to 14 percent of the population. The popularity of body piercing is a most common cause of the reaction. When the wrong type of piercing tool is used, corrosion causes the release of nickel ions, which can leach into the skin. The same goes for studs in the ear lobes. For those of us contending with the allergy, earrings, other piercings and rings are obvious triggers. But like my jeans fastener and belt buckle, other nickel encounters are less apparent.

A glasses wearer may not initially make the connection between a line of red bumps and contact with a pair of nickel-laden spectacles, while a woman may wonder what is happening to her as an underwire bra rests against her skin to cause irritation.

The good news for those who aren't yet allergic to nickel is that it can be prevented. The most important factor by far in nickel sensitization is direct and prolonged exposure to high concen-

trations of nickel.

In Canada all the silver coins are nickel-plated steel, not a problem if your contact with them is brief. Same goes for casual contact with faucets, house keys and doorknobs.

Heightened awareness and promising research proves that lowering everyday exposure to nickel can reduce sensitization rates.

— from *allergicliving.com*, M. Carolyn Black
(*Allergic Living* magazine's mission is to engage, inform and assist those living with food and environmental allergies and asthma.)

Treatment and solutions

The best treatment if you have nickel allergy is to AVOID nickel. For immediate relief, your doctor may recommend a steroid cream to help reduce inflammation and redness. Nickel allergy rashes usually clear once contact with nickel is stopped. It is important to identify the source of nickel and avoid it.

The key to avoiding nickel is to identify it BEFORE your skin does. All metal items suspected of containing nickel may be tested with a test called **Nickel Alert™** available exclusively from **Allergy Canada**. Nickel Alert quickly, safely and easily tests jewelry and other metal items for the presence of nickel. Test your metal items frequently—including "nickel free" and "hypoallergenic" items which still may have nickel in the base.

For those who wish to prevent nickel allergy and for those who have nickel allergy, we have an extensive line of guaranteed nickel free products available at **Allergy Canada**. If you have a favourite watch, jewelry or accessories that have been tested and release nickel, use **Nickel Guard™** from **Allergy Canada** to prevent the nickel from contacting the skin.



Allergy Canada introduces a new line of nickel-free products, which are certified to be free of all nickel, including the base metal, hardware and plating.