What is contact dermatitis?
Contact dermatitis is a particular type of skin inflammation caused by contact with certain substances found in the environment.

The inflammation appears as redness, swelling, itching and at times, blistering. In severe cases, the condition may cause considerable discomfort, and, on occasion, can even interfere with a person's ability to work.

What causes contact dermatitis?
The most common cause of contact dermatitis in the United States is poison ivy and its relatives, poison oak and poison sumac.

Another very common cause is nickel, which is widely used in costume jewelry.

Contact dermatitis is extremely common. At work, at home, in the garden, and elsewhere we are exposed to innumerable chemicals, metals, plants, etc. And there is always the possibility that some of them may cause a reaction in susceptible individuals.

Can I get contact dermatitis?
Yes, you can. Anyone exposed to difficult chemicals in the environment can develop a contact dermatitis.

How will the doctor identify the cause of my contact dermatitis?
In some cases the location of the rash may suggest the cause, but usually identification of the cause is not that simple.

Detection and confirmation of the specific substance that caused the rash may often require further study and patch tests.

What are patch tests?
A patch test is the application to the skin of a small amount of the chemical suspected to cause the rash. The "patch" is usually placed on the back, covered with a bandage left on the skin for 48 hours.

A positive patch test shows redness, swelling, or even blistering of the small area where the substance was in contact with the skin.

Your doctor will decide whether you need a patch test and what substance should be tested, after careful consideration of your medical history and study of the location and appearance of your rash.

What happens if I have a positive patch test?
If the cause of your rash is identified, you will be instructed to avoid further contact with it.