 OBJECTIVE: Epidemiologic evidence on contact allergy (CA) largely relies on clinical studies. However, the effects of the selection process until consultation as patient are largely unclear. STUDY DESIGN AND SETTING: Prevalences of contact allergy to important allergens estimated from the population-based nested case-control study "KORA Allergy Study" in Augsburg, Germany (a subsample from the third MONICA survey in 1997/1998, n=1141), were compared with proportions found in the Department of Dermatology of the Augsburg Municipal Hospital in patients of similar age patch tested between 1997 and 2000 (n=555). Prevalences were standardized for sex, age, and atopic dermatitis as potential confounders. RESULTS: Among the 25 substances tested, the fragrance mix (MONICA, estimated from the KORA Allergy Study: 11.4%, hospital: 12.9%) and nickel (MONICA: 9.9%, hospital: 12.9%) were the most common allergens. Larger differences between prevalences were noted particularly with ingredients of topicals used to treat varicose ulcers-a specialty of the Augsburg department, which is also reflected by comparing the department with the whole Information Network of (n =40) Departments of Dermatology (IVDK). CONCLUSION: This locally matched comparison illustrates the differential effect of selection until presentation in dermatological departments.