

PREVENTING DERMATITIS AT WORK

Advice for employers and employees



Why me?

Do you manage a small business? Or do you work on the shop floor? Perhaps you do both. Legally employers and employees have different duties and responsibilities for health and safety at work - see 'What the law says' at the end of this leaflet. In practice you both will be affected by what goes on at work. You both need to know about the health problems that can be caused by substances you come into contact with at work.

What's the problem?

Occupational dermatitis - and it affects **virtually all** industries and businesses.

Signs can be redness, itching, scaling and blistering. If it gets worse the skin can crack and bleed and the dermatitis can spread all over the body. It can be bad enough to keep you off work and serious enough to force you to change jobs. If it is spotted early and adequate precautions are taken, most people will make a full recovery. **But some people can be affected for life.**

HSE estimated that in 2002, about 39 000 people in Great Britain were suffering from a skin disease caused by their work. Most of these cases resulted from exposure of the skin to chemical agents.



How is it caused?

Occupational dermatitis is caused by the skin coming into contact with certain substances at work. Because of this it is sometimes called 'occupational contact dermatitis'. **It is not infectious, so it cannot be passed from one person to another.**

How quickly you get it depends on a number of things:

- ☐ the substance;
- ☐ its strength or potency;
- ☐ how long and how often it touches the skin.

Some things might affect you almost the first day you use them, some might take weeks, months or even years to cause occupational dermatitis.

Dermatitis usually affects the hands or forearms, the places most likely to touch the substance. But you can get it on your face, neck or chest from certain types of dusts, liquids and fumes. Dermatitis can even spread to parts of your body that haven't been in contact with the substance. It can be very painful. But with a little care most cases can be prevented.



So what's it to me?

If you are the worker - your health, your livelihood, your family and social life. It can affect you for life. Your skin can become so damaged that you might have to change jobs, possibly to a lower paid one. It affects your appearance, and although dermatitis isn't catching - some people think it is.

My social life went. I didn't go out. I just refused to go out ... William Wilson, former paint mixer

If you are in charge it can affect your health, family life and social life. You may be breaking the law, and it could cost you a lot of money.

I've had a business for 20 years: it was my life. I had to put it on the market which was something I didn't want to do... Tim Andrews, former hairdressing salon owner

Ask yourself -

- ☐ How many workers can you afford to lose?
- ☐ How many workers can you afford to re-train?
- ☐ How many days sickness a year can you afford your workers to take off?
- ☐ How many orders can you afford to lose just because you haven't got the staff that day?

It can add up to an awful lot of money.

*For the first three years that I had it, for every week I was able to work there were two weeks when I wasn't able to work....*Edward Colvill, former tiler

Look at this list. Do you work in any of these?

- ☐ Hairdressing/beauty care
- ☐ Catering and food processing
- ☐ Cleaning
- ☐ Construction
- ☐ Engineering
- ☐ Printing
- ☐ Chemical
- ☐ Health care
- ☐ Agriculture/horticulture
- ☐ Rubber
- ☐ Offshore

These are the business sectors with the highest risk of work-related skin disease.

But remember: dermatitis can affect people working in all sectors.

My hands were all cuts and blisters. I had to get my boyfriend to help me eat because I couldn't hold a knife and fork - couldn't grip anything...

Dawn Mitchell, former apprentice hairdresser

IF YOU ARE IN CHARGE, ASK YOURSELF FOUR QUESTIONS

1 Do we have a problem?

Do you have skin problems? Do any of your workers have a skin problem? If there are a few of you with skin problems, something at work might be causing it. If there's a safety representative ask them if they've noticed any problems. Even if the answer to this question is no, you should still ask yourself the next three questions.

2 Do we know what we are using?

Find out. Read the labels, look for the safety data sheets. If there isn't one get hold of it - the supplier must give you this information. See if any of the substances you use can cause dermatitis. Look for the words 'may cause skin sensitisation', or 'irritating to skin' on the label or safety data sheet. Remember some things that cause dermatitis might not be labelled. Shampoos, some cleaning materials and some diluted metal working fluids do not carry these labels; but if you use them a lot over a long period of time they can still cause dermatitis.

3 Can we use a safer alternative?

If you are using something that can cause dermatitis, can you use something safer? Try asking your trade association.

4 Can we do the job in a safer way?

If you can't use a safer alternative, can you do the job in a safer way? Can you stop skin contact with the substance by automating the process for instance? If it's dust and fumes that are causing the dermatitis, some sort of exhaust ventilation might help.

In some jobs there is nothing you can do to stop contact with substances that can cause dermatitis but there is still a lot you can do to protect yourself.

- ☐ Wearing the right sort of gloves can help protect against chemical splashes when you are handling substances that can cause dermatitis. Remember to change them frequently.
- ☐ Use a moisturising cream before and after work. This will help to replace the natural oils that your skin loses when you wash or when you come into contact with detergents and solvents.
- ☐ Wear a face shield or full-face mask, and protective coveralls if you do a job where liquids, fumes or dust that can cause dermatitis might get onto your face and neck.
- ☐ Keep your skin clean.
- ☐ Make sure your protective clothes are clean and intact.
- ☐ Keep your workplace clean, including machinery and tools.
- ☐ If you use diluted chemicals, make sure they are diluted to the correct strength - if they are over strength they are more likely to cause dermatitis.

If you are in charge make sure:

- ☐ you tell your employees about any substances they work with that can cause dermatitis and train them to use properly any control measures you provide;
- ☐ you provide the right protective clothing and gloves, ask your supplier. There are different types for different jobs to protect against different substances;
- ☐ you have protective clothing cleaned and replaced regularly (unless they are disposable);
- ☐ there are adequate washing facilities.

What the law says

If you are an employer you have a duty under the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 to prevent your employees from coming into contact with substances hazardous to health which cause dermatitis. If it is not reasonably practicable for you to prevent their exposure to these substances, the law says you must do what you can to control that exposure.

If you are an employee you have a legal duty to cooperate with your employer on health and safety matters and to take reasonable care of your own health: you must use the equipment that your employer provides to protect your health and tell your supervisor if anything goes wrong with it.

Skin checks for people working with substances known to cause severe dermatitis

If you are likely to be in contact with substances that are known to cause severe dermatitis, you should have regular skin checks.

If you are in charge you should set up a system of skin checks for your workers. In the first instance you will probably need an occupational health nurse or doctor to train somebody to carry out skin inspections and to advise you on how often you should carry them out. The trained person can only look for abnormal signs: they are not qualified to make judgements about the cause of any skin problems they may come across. They should refer anyone with apparent skin problems to their GP or the works occupational health nurse or doctor if there is one.

As a worker it is in your interest to go for the skin inspections your manager provides. If you start to get dermatitis and it is spotted at an early stage, you can do something about it. If you ignore the problem, it might not go away: it could affect you for life.

As well as protecting your health, these inspections also help to make sure that the systems in place to protect you are working. If a few of you start to show symptoms, something might be wrong. For instance you might need new protective clothing. **If you are in charge** check again that you are doing all you can to protect your workers' health. And **if you are the worker** make sure that you are following the instructions - use the work methods and protective clothing that are there to protect your health.

Remember to report any skin problems to your manager immediately. Tell your safety representative, if you have one, so that they can take this up with your employer.

If you go to see your GP about any skin problem, remember to tell him or her about the work you do and the substances you use. If the symptoms don't go away you may need to see a skin specialist, ideally one who specialises in occupational skin problems.

At their very worst my hands were covered in Vaseline and I just sat there. I couldn't bear one finger to touch another one. It was just much too painful. That was the full extent of my life... Edward Colvill, former tiler

Consultation and safety representatives

If you are in charge of a business you must consult employees on health and safety issues. If you recognise a trade union this must be done through the representatives they appoint who can investigate complaints about health and safety from the employees they represent, and who can take these matters up with you.

If you are the worker and you have any concerns or problems about working with substances that can cause dermatitis you can ask your safety representative, if you have one, to take them up with your boss.

Further reading

Selecting protective gloves for work with chemicals: Guidance for employers and health and safety specialists Leaflet INDG330 HSE Books 2000 (single copy free or priced packs of 15 ISBN 0 7176 1827 7)

Cost and effectiveness of chemical protective gloves for the workplace: Guidance for employers and health and safety specialists HSG206 HSE Books 2001 ISBN 0 7176 1828 5

Assessing and managing risks at work from skin exposure to chemical agents: Guidance for employers and health and safety specialists HSG205 HSE Books 2001 ISBN 0 7176 1826 9

COSHH essentials: Easy steps to control chemicals - Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations HSG193 (Second edition) HSE Books 2003 ISBN 0 7176 2737 3 (Also freely available on the Internet at www.coshh-essentials.org.uk)

Control of substances hazardous to health. The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002. Approved Code of Practice and guidance L5 (Fourth edition) HSE Books 2002 ISBN 0 7176 2534 6

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This leaflet contains notes on good practice which are not compulsory but which you may find helpful in considering what you need to do.

This leaflet is available in priced packs of 15 from HSE Books, ISBN 0 7176 1246 5. Single free copies are also available from HSE Books.

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INDG233

Reprinted 3/04

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Printed and published by the Health and Safety Executive

RASH DECISIONS

HSE's video on work-related dermatitis - its causes, effects and prevention

Work-related dermatitis affects many people in all sorts of industries - hairdressing, construction, catering, cleaning, engineering, printing and horticulture, to name but a few. An estimated 66 000 people have a skin disease caused by their work, resulting in half a million working days lost each year. The good news is that this suffering and financial loss are preventable.

Rash decisions aims to raise awareness of the causes of occupational dermatitis and the steps employers need to take to prevent it.

This video demonstrates that managing the risks makes good business sense and prevents unnecessary suffering.

Running time: 17 minutes

Available from: HSE Books (see details opposite).

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