

Medical guidance notes and information

Skin

Occupational dermatitis is a non infectious inflammation of the skin. It is one of the commonest causes of industrial disease. It costs UK employers up to 20 Million pounds per year in sickness absence and retraining costs.

Occupational dermatitis is caused by the skin coming into contact with certain substances at work.

There are two types of occupational dermatitis - irritant or allergic. The symptoms are:

- redness;
- itching;
- scaling;
- blisters.

The skin can crack and bleed leading to infection. It can spread to other parts of the body and can be very painful.

Irritant Dermatitis

This is the most common form of work related skin disease. This can be caused by:

Chemical skin irritants

- acids;
- alkali – caustic soda;
- oils;
- disinfectants/bleach;
- solvents;
- alcohol;
- food e.g. citrus fruits.

Physical Irritants

- friction from dust and abrasives;
- friction from Swarf;
- handling hot and cold objects;
- temperature extremes;
- prolonged contact with water ‘wet work’;
- friction of skin and clothing;
- low relative humidity.

Repeated contact can degrease the skin, drying it out, causing chapping, redness and itchiness. This can predispose the skin to further damage by chemicals.

Allergic Dermatitis

- This is relatively rare;
- Is a specific form of allergy to a substance;

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- Examples of substances causing allergic dermatitis are Nickel, Hexavalent Chromium, Epoxy resins;
- It can be caused by repeated exposure, or a single exposure to that substance;
- Once a person has developed an allergy, further contact to that substance (to even a minute dose) can result in an allergic reaction;
- It can also affect parts of the body which are not exposed ex the face;
- Allergic dermatitis is more likely to develop if there is irritant dermatitis (if the skin is broken this allows the allergen to enter the body more readily).
- Occupational dermatitis can be prevented. See advice on looking after the skin.

Skin Care Advice

- Keep your skin clean;
- Use a pre-work cream and an after work cream;
- The longer the chemical stays on the skin the greater damage to your skin;
- Wash skin before all your breaks, i.e. before eating, before and after going to the toilet and on finishing work;
- Keep your work place clean, in particular, your machinery and your tools;
- Rinse well in running, lukewarm water if possible. Never use water which is too hot as this will dry your skin;
- Dry your skin well;

Always keep your skin moisturised - always apply after work cream.

When handling the substances at work known to cause Dermatitis wear suitable gloves (as per the COSHH assessment – ask your SQE Adviser or manager) for the task and make sure they are the correct size.

Wear other personal protective equipment (PPE) provided, e.g. overalls, shoes.

Keep your personal protective equipment clean and intact. Check regularly your equipment and replace if worn or torn.

- Cream has **very minimal** protection against sensitisers and irritants and only if applied correctly and regularly. Therefore, LUOH do not advise their use. Instead wear gloves and use after work cream.
- Check your skin every day.
- If you notice a rash, tell your supervisor or manager, who may refer to Occupational Health for further advice.

See your family doctor for treatment.

The Duty of the Employer

- To eliminate risk of exposure wherever possible;
- To inform and train staff about the risk of a substance used at work;
- To provide and instruct on correct use of PPE;
- To provide washing facilities and provision for cleaning of work clothes;
- To provide health surveillance under Regulations 11 of the COSHH regulations 1994.

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