

• *Dermatitis*

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The skin is the heaviest organ in the human body. It is also very vulnerable to injury.

One of the main risks to the skin is dermatitis.

Dermatitis means inflammation of the skin. It is sometimes called eczema. The main symptoms can include itching, cracking, blistering and ulceration. If someone has dermatitis the skin often looks red, sore and scaly.

There are many different types of dermatitis but one of the main causes of the illness developing is contact with substances used at work or wet work. As a guide, wet work includes:

- More than 2 hours contact with water per day
- 20 or more hand washes per day
- Tasks such as daily cleaning of tools and surfaces
- Preparing and processing wet food - Catering is a wet working profession.

The 2005/2006 self reported work related illness survey estimated the prevalence of self reported work related skin disease in Great Britain as 27,000. Between 2003 and 2005 an estimated average of 3200 new cases were diagnosed of which 75% of diseases was contact dermatitis.

WHAT CAUSES DERMATITIS?

There are two main types of dermatitis caused by work.

The first is called *irritant contact dermatitis*. This condition arises from working with substances that physically damage the skin when they came into contact. Among the chemicals that can cause this type of damage many are in common use such as acids and alkalis (e.g. caustic soda or cement) and organic solvents (white spirit and alcohol).

Organic solvents can dissolve the skins protective layer of oils leaving it dry cracked and vulnerable.

Some strong irritants can cause immediate damage resulting in serious skin burns. Many weaker substances may require days of contact before there is any visible effect.

The second main type of dermatitis is called *allergic contact dermatitis*. This accounts for about twenty per cent of all forms of work-related dermatitis and is caused by certain chemicals called “sensitisors”. This is where the body’s immune system reacts to one of these substances. In many cases someone can work with a substance for years without any reaction and then suddenly develop dermatitis. Once a person becomes sensitised, even minute exposure may cause a severe reaction. It is quite common to

find that once someone develops allergic contact dermatitis in reaction to one substance they also become “cross sensitised” to a range of substances.

WHO GETS DERMATITIS?

Anyone can get dermatitis, but it is more common in certain jobs. Some UNISON members, such as nurses, laboratory workers, some craft workers, cooks and cleaners are all far more likely to develop dermatitis than the general population. This is because of the chemicals and substances they work with and also the environment, especially if the workplace is hot or humid.

Some of the possible substances that can lead to dermatitis developing which a safety representative should look out for are:

- Cleaning and laundry – rubber gloves, detergents, soaps, caustic soda, disinfectants, bleaches, washing powders, cleaning fluids, and ammonia.
- Catering – food ingredients (including flours, spices and sugar), cleaning materials, and nickel and chrome from sinks and other surfaces.
- Care work – cleaning materials, wet work, rubber gloves, dyes, shampoos, and contact with animals.
- Grounds maintenance – fertilisers, herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, treated bulbs and seeds, tulips, daffodils, and certain woods and wood products.
- Nursing – antiseptics, bacteria, fungi, adhesives, contact with stainless steel, lanolin, formalin, ethylene oxide, penicillin and some other drugs, and the biggest problem, latex gloves (especially powdered ones).
- Office work – correcting fluids, copy paper, photocopier chemicals, adhesives, and ink removers.
- Laboratory technicians and technical workers – a wide range of chemicals especially organic solvents and in particular alcohols, but also waxes, toluene, xylene, phenol, acids, mercury bichloride, and x-ray chemicals.
- Craft and maintenance – de-scaling and cleaning chemicals, solvents, paints, thinners, creosote, resins, adhesive, super glue, cement, plaster, stainers, mineral fibres, fibre board, mdf, rubber, and pitch.
- Drivers – oil, petrol, disinfectants, anti-freeze, chrome, and rubber.

This list is not comprehensive and if a skin problem develops it is important that the member is properly examined by a trained doctor to see what is causing the condition.

Some substances can be shown to cause dermatitis in a person by a process called patch testing, in other cases a more detailed examination is necessary. Dermatitis can be caused by a combination of factors so there is not always one single substance that can be shown to be responsible.

Remember dermatitis can develop suddenly as a result of exposure to a substance that has had no effect on the individual in the past.

AVOIDANCE

Dermatitis can be easily avoided. These simple steps can help prevent members from developing dermatitis:

- **Cutting out chemicals:** reduce the number of chemicals. Often safer ways of doing the job are possible or chemicals are not necessary.
- **Substitution:** substitute any products suspected of causing dermatitis for a safer alternative. For example many hospitals have stopped using powdered latex gloves and have replaced them with

safer gloves. However it is always worth checking whether the substitute is safe or is likely to introduce other health problems.

- **Trials:** see that all products are properly tested for safety and that new items are initially only purchased on a trial basis so that any adverse reactions can be checked.
- **Information:** make sure that management keep a complete list of all products in the workplace and warn staff of any hazards. This information should also be available to any staff whose first language is not English.
- **Handling:** make sure that substances requiring dilution, such as disinfectants are diluted before they are distributed, or provide equipment so that staff can measure accurately the correct quantity of the products themselves.
- **Control:** control the spread of chemicals and other agents by improving ventilation or enclosing any hazardous processes.
- **Protective clothing:** if it is not possible to remove or substitute a chemical then make sure staff have personal protection, such as overalls and gloves. However remember that protective clothing should be used as a last resort and that latex gloves and masks are one of the main causes of occupational dermatitis.
- **Storage:** all products and chemicals known to cause dermatitis must be safely stored in properly labelled containers. They must carry the appropriate hazard warning and give advice on how to neutralise their effects.
- **Training:** all staff should be trained in the safe handling of workplace substances.
- **Records:** make sure that any cases of occupational dermatitis are reported in the accident book. Safety reps should check the accident book regularly to see if there are any substances causing dermatitis among their members. In many cases of dermatitis the employer has a legal duty to report it to the Health and Safety Authorities under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulation (RIDDOR)
- **Job protection:** branches should ensure that any members who become sensitised to any substances used in the workplace and develop allergic contact dermatitis are allowed to change jobs without any loss of seniority or earnings if they so wish.
- **Hygiene:** encourage good hygiene where staff are handling potentially hazardous chemicals. All cuts and wounds should be covered, and hands and forearms should be washed before work.

THE LAW

Most of the points listed above are actually legal requirements. There are several laws that can be used to force employers to take precautions against the substances that can cause dermatitis. These are:

The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations (COSHH)

These are the main legal requirements for assessing and controlling the risks from substances at work.

These regulations oblige employers to make a “suitable and sufficient “ assessment of the risks from chemicals and hazardous substances including the risk of dermatitis. No chemicals should be used without a risk assessment first being conducted.

The regulations require employers to bring in all necessary measures to prevent the risks to health and to check that they are working.

Where necessary, the employers must introduce a system of health surveillance for employees and carry out health checks.

They must also provide information and training to all staff about the risk of dermatitis and how to prevent it.

COSHH stresses that the priority should be placed on prevention by changing jobs to remove the hazardous exposure or by introducing a safer substitute. If this is not reasonably practical then the employer must adequately control exposure by totally enclosing the process or using extraction equipment. If that is not possible, they must minimise exposure by other means.

Only when this has been attempted and it has been established that these methods cannot adequately control the risk to the worker, can the employer resort to personal protective equipment.

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations

The Management Regulations cover all work processes, not just hazardous substances. Like COSHH, the Management Regulations say that risk assessments should be carried out on all work processes. This means that where there is a risk of dermatitis developing because of hot, cold or wet working conditions this should have been assessed and appropriate measures taken.

The Workplace (Health Safety and Welfare) Regulations

The Workplace Regulations require employers to provide adequate welfare facilities for people at work. These should include adequate wash basins, and drying facilities.

Personal Protective Equipment at Work Regulations

The Personal Protective Equipment Regulations says that protective clothing and equipment should be suitable for the risk and for the wearer, maintained, and provided free of charge. However remember that the law also states that personal protective equipment is a last resort which should only be used after other solutions, in particular elimination, substitution and control of risk have been investigated and found inappropriate or wanting.

The Chemicals (Hazard Information and Packaging for Supply) Regulations 2009

Known as CHIP 4, these regulations require suppliers to identify the hazards and dangers of the chemicals they supply, to give information about the hazards to those supplied on the label and also to supply much more detail in a safety data sheet. The Regulations also say that chemicals must be packaged safely. The CHIP 4 Regulations include a list of hazardous chemicals, however not all dangerous workplace chemicals are included. Nevertheless suppliers and manufacturers of all substances and products likely to cause any ill health or injury are required to provide safety data sheets.

Safety reps should always ask for copies of safety data sheets on any chemicals in use in the workplace. However material safety data sheets are supplied by the manufacturers of the chemicals and therefore are not always totally reliable. UNISON has seen many examples of safety data sheets that are inaccurate, misleading, or completely useless. (See separate information sheet on safety data sheets)

The Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations

Under these UNISON's safety representatives have a legal right to consult with management over safety issues, represent members, inspect workplaces and investigate problems. They also have the right to receive all relevant safety information, including summaries of health surveillance findings.

By using these rights safety representatives should be able to help remove the risk of dermatitis at work.

REPORTING DERMATITIS

The Reporting of Injuries Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (RIDDOR) state that many cases of occupational dermatitis diagnosed in writing by a doctor have to be reported to the health and safety authorities by the employer. The Health and Safety Executive have issued a list of chemicals and other agents where exposure at work that leads to dermatitis must be reported.

COMPENSATION AND BENEFITS

Members who develop occupational dermatitis could be eligible for compensation.

UNISON's free legal service can help members win personal injury compensation. To do this for occupational dermatitis the union has to prove that:

- The worker has dermatitis,
- The condition is caused by the job, and
- The condition arose as a result of the employer's negligence.

The Department of Social Security's Industrial Injury Benefits Scheme will also pay out money for occupational dermatitis. This is a "no fault" scheme. Three things must be shown for a member to qualify:

- The worker was an employed person when they developed the condition,
- They have "a prescribed industrial disease or injury" – skin rashes and dermatitis are covered by this definition, and
- They have suffered "loss of faculty" which creates a level of disability assessed at 14% or more.

In addition many employers run their own occupational disease and injury benefit schemes. These are often more generous than other schemes.

If you do have a member who you believe has developed dermatitis at work, please fill in a personal injury form as soon as possible. (Details from your branch secretary).