

HUMAN RESOURCES

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YOUR SKIN AND WORK

Your skin is sometimes considered as the largest organ in your body. It performs a wide variety of tasks;

- As a physical barrier to the outside world, protecting you from bumps and abrasions
- As a barrier against infection
- Preventing water loss from the body
- Controlling the body temperature through sweat glands.

As with other parts of the body it is important to ensure that your skin is kept healthy otherwise it cannot perform the actions it is meant to and hence protect your overall health.

When the skin is damaged by chemicals or work related issues it shows various symptoms and a breakdown of its protective actions will occur, leading to itchiness, pain, infections and possibly disease.

The most common work related skin disease is contact dermatitis from either being in contact with chemicals, oils or constant immersion in water and detergents. Symptoms can develop up to 48hrs after being in contact with the materials. It is not infectious and cannot be passed from one person to another.

Symptoms can include:

- Redness
- Itching
- Swelling
- Blistering
- Flaking and cracking of the skin

The damaged skin is painful and is then more easily attacked by chemicals and infectious organisms.

Some individuals can develop allergic dermatitis from substances handled in the workplace e.g. the metals nickel and chromium which can be found in work equipment, cement and some of the cutting fluids which are used in sawing and drilling components.

Allergic reactions can occur instantaneously on exposure to certain substance or they may take years to build up. Substances handled on a daily basis without any effect may suddenly produce an adverse skin reaction. Once sensitised any further contact will produce an immediate reaction and in many cases these will grow in severity the more often exposure occurs. Some individuals eventually have to give up their chosen profession due to the allergic response being so strong following exposure to even minute amounts of the material they are allergic to.

Employers and managers of premises should brief their staff on the hazards of dermatitis and encourage self skin examination of vulnerable areas e.g. hands, forearms and areas which may come into contact with materials. Particular attention should be paid to items of jewellery e.g. rings, where chemicals may be trapped under the item and remain in contact with the skin over a longer period of time.

The HSE recommends steps to reduce the incidence of skin damage at work, APC.

Avoid – Can you use something less harmful, use it less often, or introduce controls to keep the skin away from the hazard

Protect – Issue protective equipment such as gloves.
Provide washing facilities, mild skin cleansing creams, drying facilities of paper towels or hot air hand driers.
Wash your hands before eating and drinking. Hands should be washed before and after wearing gloves

Where extensive wet work or handling of solvents is carried out, moisturise the skin often during the day, at least at the start and end of the working day.

Check – Workers should check their skin on a regular basis. Problems spotted early can generally be more easily cured and will lead to less pain and suffering.

Seek medical advice if you have any concerns regarding skin condition

Dermatitis will almost always require medical help to heal up. Topical creams and protecting the skin from further contact will be required to enable the skin to regain its normal state. Thereafter, as stated, greater care will be required to prevent a recurrence.

Occupational dermatitis is a reportable disease under Reporting of Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations, RIDDOR. Failure to report is a criminal act and can lead to prosecution and fines.

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