

DERMATITIS

DERMATITIS

This is a debilitating and unsightly condition of the skin. At best it is irritating or painful. At worst, it can be seriously disabling and could end someone's employment prospects.

Early signs are redness, flaking, itching and cracking of the skin, particularly in the webs between the fingers.

Dermatitis is an occupational health risk that is particularly associated with the catering, cleaning, horticulture, gardening and floristry industries: and with the beautician and hairdressing professions. It costs the country more than £85m per year.

THE LAW REQUIRES YOU TO PROTECT AGAINST THIS RISK

What you must do

1. Make an assessment of the risk

(Advise sheets 2 and 4 will give you further guidance on this)

You have a legal duty to assess the risk to your employees of developing dermatitis from exposure to substances in the workplace. To do so you must recognise the main causes:-

- Some substances can either irritate the skin (e.g. acids or alkalis, detergents or degreasers (solvents), or sensitise the skin (e.g. some ingredients found in perfumes or soaps, hair dyes, components of some synthetic rubber gloves).
- Dermatitis may develop after a single exposure to an irritating substance, or after repeated exposure over a long period of time during which the skin's resilience is reduced.
- The frequency and duration of contact with a substance, as well as the concentration involved has a strong effect on the development of dermatitis.

Regular health surveillance to identify the early symptoms is essential; early diagnosis can substantially reduce the impact of the condition.

3. Control the exposure

You must adequately control risks associated with Dermatitis. You should always seek to prevent the problem first, selecting measures that benefit the majority before you take steps that protect the individual.

- Ideally, avoid using strongly irritating or sensitising substances altogether by changing the process or using a less harmful substitute.
- Attempt to control the exposure at source e.g. by enclosing, automating, using extraction equipment etc.
- Choose ways of working that avoid or minimise exposure to substances.
- Use Personal Protective Equipment (such as gloves or aprons) in addition to all other measures of controlling exposure.

In addition to the above consider limiting the number of employees who are exposed and/or reducing the time and frequency that they are exposed.

4. Instruct and supervise staff

- Make sure they know the early signs of dermatitis
- Make sure they know the correct precautions and procedures
- Supervise staff to ensure that they are following the correct procedures and are using the necessary precautions when they should be

5. Recognise the early symptoms

Regular checking of exposed skin to identify the early symptoms is an important part of your overall control of the risk of developing dermatitis. Early detection along with appropriate treatment will halt and may reverse the process.

- It is essential to seek medical advice as soon as symptoms are noticed.
- Identifying symptoms indicates that a problem exists which you need to investigate and deal with.
- Health surveillance is not an alternative to a proper risk assessment.
- Tailor surveillance to the level of risk within your workplace.
- Surveillance can be carried out by your own staff *providing they have received appropriate instruction in what to look for, and they understand the role it plays in controlling the risks within the workplace.*

6. Report cases to your enforcing authority

Cases of dermatitis (diagnosed by a registered medical practitioner) must be reported to your enforcing authority on form F2508a (see Advice Sheet 10 and Introduction to Pack) where they are caused by the use of certain specified substances in the workplace, including any known irritant or sensitising agent.

Further Information

1 Details of which diseases are reportable are contained in A Guide to the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995: (HSE) L73 ISBN 0-7176-2431-5;
Preventing Dermatitis at Work: (HSE) IND(G)233(L); Understanding Health Surveillance at Work – An Introduction for employers: (HSE) INDG304; Health Surveillance at Work (HSE) HSG61, ISBN 0-7176-1705-x; Health Risk Management – A practical guide for managers in small and medium enterprises; (HSE) HS(G) 137, ISBN 0-7176-0905-7;
Video-Rash Decisions: CFL Vision, PO Box 35, Wetherby, West Yorkshire, LS23 7EX.