

Dermatitis at work

A guide for UNISON safety
representatives on prevention
for members



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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.

Every year 80,000 people suffer from skin problems caused, or made worse by work. These can be avoided.

This booklet will help tell you how.

What causes dermatitis?

There are two main types of dermatitis that can be caused by work.

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

Organic solvents can dissolve the skin's 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 20 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.

Contact with stainless steel, particularly when wet, is a very potent cause of sensitisation. This is because of the nickel and chromium contained in the steel. Rubber (latex) in gloves and facemasks is also a big problem.

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 workplace environment, especially if it is hot or humid. Wet work also encourages dermatitis to develop.

Safety representative should look out for the substances and triggers that can lead to dermatitis developing. These could be:

- Cleaning and laundry—rubber gloves, detergents, soaps, caustic soda, disinfectants, bleaches, washing powders, cleaning fluids, ammonia.

- Catering—food ingredients (including flours, spices and sugar), cleaning materials, nickel and chrome from sinks and other surfaces.
- Care work—cleaning materials, wet work, rubber gloves, dyes, shampoos, contact with animals.
- Grounds maintenance—fertilisers, herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, treated bulbs and seeds, tulips, daffodils, certain woods and wood products.
- Nursing—antiseptics, bacteria, fungi, adhesives, contact with stainless steel, lanolin, formalin, ethylene oxide, penicillin and some other drugs. Latex gloves (especially powdered ones) are a big problem.
- Office work—correcting fluids, copy paper, photocopier chemicals, adhesives, ink removers.
- Laboratory technicians and technical workers—a wide range of chemicals especially organic solvents and in particular alcohols. Also waxes, toluene, xylene, phenol, acids, mercury bichloride, X-ray chemicals.
- Craft and maintenance—de-scaling and cleaning chemicals, solvents, paints, thinners, creosote, resins, adhesive, superglue, cement, plaster, stainers, mineral fibres, fibreboard, MDF, rubber, pitch.
- Drivers—oil, petrol, disinfectants, anti-freeze, chrome, rubber.

None of these lists are comprehensive and if a skin problem develops it is important that the UNISON member is properly examined by a trained doctor to see what is causing the condition.

Some substances can be detected as the cause of 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: or reducing the number of chemicals. Often safer ways of doing the job are possible, or chemicals are not necessary at all.
- 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 keeps a complete list of all products in the workplace and warns 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.
- **Job protection:** branches should ensure that any members who become sensitised to any substances used in the workplace and develop allergic contact dermatitis as a result 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 which can be used to force employers to take precautions against the substances that can cause dermatitis. These are:

COSHH

The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations are the main legal requirement 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 a priority should be made of prevention by allowing employees to change jobs to avoid 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.

Management Regulations

The Management of Health and Safety at Work 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.

Workplace Regulations

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

Protective Equipment Regulations

Personal Protective Equipment at Work Regulations say 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.

CHIP

The Chemicals (Hazard Information and Packaging for Supply) require suppliers to identify the hazards and dangers of the chemicals they supply, to give information about the hazards 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 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 for any chemicals in use in the workplace.

Warning—safety data sheets are supplied by the chemical manufacturers and therefore are not always totally reliable. UNISON has seen many examples of safety data sheets that are either inaccurate, misleading, or completely useless.

Safety Representatives Regulations

Under the Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977 (1979 in Northern Ireland) 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 which 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,
- 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.
- they have suffered 'loss of faculty' which creates a level of disability assessed at 14 per cent 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).

Further information

UNISON has produced a free guide which covers all the legislation mentioned in this booklet. It is called *The Health and Safety Six Pack*. Your Branch Secretary can order a copy from UNISON Communications, quoting stock number 1660.

Every branch should also have a copy of the excellent TUC guide to health and safety *Hazards at Work*. This 300-page guide includes a section on skin diseases and is an indispensable tool for every branch Health and Safety officer.

If you have any specific health and safety queries, your branch Health and Safety officer or Branch Secretary may be able to help you. If they are unable to answer the query, they may pass the request to the regional office or to the Health and Safety Unit at head office.

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Your comments

UNISON welcomes comments on this booklet from branch safety officers and safety reps. Either write or e-mail to the Health and Safety Unit at the address above.