

Preventing contact dermatitis and urticaria at work



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Introduction

This leaflet explains how you, as an employer, can protect your employees from skin problems known as contact dermatitis and urticaria. It will also be useful to employees and their representatives.

The leaflet will help you identify what tasks and substances may cause harm, and introduces practical steps for controlling the risks. The information it contains will help you comply with the law.

What is contact dermatitis?

Contact dermatitis is the most common type of occupational skin disease. It is defined as inflammation of the skin resulting from exposure to detergents, toiletries, chemicals and even natural products, for example, foods. Prolonged or frequent contact with water (often termed wet work) can also cause it.

There are two types of occupational contact dermatitis and it can affect all parts of the body, but mainly the hands:

- irritant contact dermatitis;
- allergic contact dermatitis.

Irritant contact dermatitis is caused by things that dry out and damage the skin, eg detergents, solvents, oils and prolonged or frequent contact with water.

Allergic contact dermatitis occurs when a person develops an allergy to something that comes into contact with their skin. The allergic reaction can appear over hours or days, or even months. Common causes include chemicals in cement, some hair products, Epoxy resins and some foods.



What are the signs and symptoms of contact dermatitis?

The signs and symptoms of the different types of dermatitis are similar. Dry, red and itchy skin is usually the first sign. Flaking, blistering, crusting, cracking, swelling and pain can follow this.

Sometimes the consequences of contact with a material or substance are immediately visible; sometimes they are not. Don't be lulled into a false sense of security, as the effects can be cumulative.



What is urticaria?

Urticaria is a different kind of allergy. It occurs within minutes of the material touching the skin. Common causes are certain plants, foods and natural rubber latex gloves.

What does urticaria look like?



Urticaria typically shows as a wheal (swelling) and flare (redness) reaction, eg nettle rash.

Which jobs present most risk of contact dermatitis and urticaria?

Those working in health care, hairdressing, the beauty industry, printing, cleaning, catering, construction and metalworking are at greater risk. However, contact dermatitis and urticaria can occur in just about any workplace.

What does the law require?

The law requires employers to prevent or, where that is not reasonably practicable, adequately control exposure to materials in the workplace that cause ill health like dermatitis. The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 (COSHH) require employers to:

- assess risks;
- provide adequate control measures – and ensure the use and maintenance of these;
- provide information, instruction and training; and
- in appropriate cases, provide health surveillance.

How to prevent dermatitis or urticaria developing

Use the APC (avoid, protect, check) approach to reduce or control the risks:

- Avoid contact with materials that cause these conditions where possible.
- Protect the skin.
- Check for early signs of dermatitis.

Examples of how you can avoid contact are:

- substitute, by replacing a hazardous material with a safer alternative;
- automate the process;
- enclose the process as much as possible;
- use mechanical handling;
- use equipment for handling – don't use your hands as tools;
- keep a safe working distance.

If the steps above aren't reasonably practicable or aren't enough to totally avoid contact, you should:

- provide appropriate protective clothing/gloves;
- make sure clothing/gloves are used and stored correctly, and replaced when necessary;
- tell employees to wash any contamination from their skin promptly;
- tell them to dry their hands thoroughly after washing/cleaning;
- supply moisturising pre-work and after-work creams.

When employees are exposed to residual risk of harm from hazardous substances, **and you have put in place all appropriate means of controlling exposure**, regular skin checks should be carried out to look for early signs of dermatitis.

Checks are likely to be needed in the high risk industries mentioned under 'Which jobs present most risk of contact dermatitis and urticaria?'

- Early detection can prevent more serious dermatitis from developing.
- Checks can help you to see if the preventative measures are working.

If skin problems are identified, employees should be advised to see an appropriate health professional. As the employer you will need to know what tasks affected employees are fit to do and what controls will protect them.

Further advice can be found at:

www.hse.gov.uk/skin

www.hse.gov.uk/health-surveillance

www.health4work.nhs.uk/

Further information

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