



# HEALTH & SAFETY

## What causes dermatitis?

Work-related dermatitis can be caused by exposure to chemical agents and wet work (it means having hands repeatedly wet for long periods during the working day). Other agents causing work-related dermatitis can be biological (eg plants and/or bacteria), physical (eg vibration and/or radiation) and mechanical (eg abrasion). Dermatitis accounts for about 70% of work-related skin disease. Hands are most at risk but other parts of the body can be affected.

## Your Legal Obligations

The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health [COSHH] Regulations require employers to identify the hazards associated with substances in the workplace, such as chemical agents, and assess the extent of likely exposure when these substances are used. Based on these assessments, they must then determine the health risks. Once a judgement of the risks has been evaluated, controls to minimise these must be put in place. The law is clear. Until this has been done employees may not work with substances hazardous to health.

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 describe what employers are required to do to manage health and safety. These regulations are important for hazardous substances and wet working. Employers must consult employees and their representatives on health and safety matters including when prevention of dermal exposure is not reasonably practicable. Employees must co-operate with the employer to meet these legal obligations.

## What are hazardous substances?

In this context, these are substances (and wet work) capable of causing damage to the skin and can be divided into four groups:

- Those that cause irritation to the skin leading to irritant contact dermatitis
- Those that sensitise the skin causing allergic contact dermatitis
- Those that cause other skin disease such as skin cancer and skin discolouration (depigmentation)
- Those that cause other effects such as burns

Many substances can penetrate the skin and are capable of causing diseases elsewhere in the body. While harmful substances and wet work are a major cause of skin disease, constantly working in uncomfortably hot or cold surroundings or excessively dry or wet conditions can also cause serious skin disorders.

## Control Measures

There is a legal duty to prevent work-related dermatitis by preventing skin contact with hazardous substances. This must be done by establishing a safe system of work, including safe handling methods, training and instruction of employees to help them carry out their work safely, providing suitable personal protective equipment (PPE) and skin creams and adequate washing facilities. It also makes sense to carry out regular skin checks to identify cases of dermatitis and ensure these controls are working.

### Do Not

- X Immerse the hands in chemicals or allow prolonged repeated contact with water
- X Work so as to cause chemical splashes to the skin
- X Allow skin to come into contact with contaminated work-pieces, surfaces, tools, clothing etc.

### Do

- ✓ Know health risks associated with chemicals and products used in the workplace.
- ✓ Ensure the labels on the container are read
- ✓ Use tools and methods which will prevent skin contact with hazardous substances
- ✓ Use suitable protective gloves where necessary
- ✓ Ensure hands are washed and dried regularly, including before donning and after removing protective gloves
- ✓ Use pre- and after-work creams to ensure good skin condition. Remember pre-work creams are not a replacement for protective gloves
- ✓ Seek medical advice if there are concerns about the condition of the skin

