

Occupational Health Service

Skin Protection Programme

What does the skin do?

The skin is complex in structure. As well as having many essential functions, the skin is the body's first line of defence against physical, thermal, chemical and microbiological hazards. Prolonged exposure to some substances, even hot water, can challenge the skin's protective mechanism.

Does skin protection concern me?

Skin is exposed to a variety of substances and environments which can aggravate it. Work-related skin diseases are caused or made worse by coming into contact with a range of substances such as resins, metalworking fluids and having wet hands for long periods. Work-related skin diseases are very common and can affect people in many types of work but they happen more in certain high risk jobs.

If you develop a work-related skin disease, it could cause real suffering which could result in sickness absence and affect your employability.

What are work-related skin diseases?

Work-related or occupational dermatitis is by far the most common work-related skin problem, but urticaria and skin cancer may also occur.

What is work-related dermatitis?

Dermatitis describes the reaction of the skin when it becomes inflamed. There are 2 types of dermatitis. Irritant contact dermatitis, which can develop after a single exposure (acute) or repeated, prolonged exposure (chronic) to hazardous substances which causes irritation. Irritants can be chemical, biological, mechanical or physical. Prolonged and repeated contact with water can also cause irritant dermatitis. In some cases, more than one substance will be involved, for example water and detergents. Other examples of substances which cause irritant dermatitis are: soaps, shampoos, solvents, metalworking fluids and oils and greases.

The other type of dermatitis is allergic contact dermatitis. This type can occur when an individual develops an allergy to a substance. Once someone is sensitised, it is likely that it is permanent and any further contact with the substance will cause allergic contact dermatitis. Often skin sensitisers are also irritants. Common causes of allergic contact dermatitis are: adhesives, wet cement, some plants and some foods and UV cured printing inks.

Checking your skin regularly can help to detect dermatitis early and which can make it easier to treat. Links: <http://www.hse.gov.uk/skin/posters/skindermatitis.pdf>.

Signs and symptoms of work-related dermatitis:

- Skin rash
- Swelling
- Blistering which can weep and form crusts
- Itchy
- Flaking and cracking

What should I expect from my employer?

Under the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 (COSHH), employers are required to prevent or, where this is not possible, control exposure to hazardous materials which are known to cause skin diseases or which enter the body through the skin and cause problems elsewhere. Employers must also provide information, instruction and training and provide health surveillance where required. It is essential that you are made aware of work-related skin diseases and the causes to help you to look after your skin and identify the first signs and symptoms.

Why do I need skin health surveillance?

Work-related skin diseases are very common but if the signs are detected early enough through health surveillance and steps are taken to reduce workers' exposure to the substances responsible the disease may be reduced or cured. The aim is to protect your health and to check the effectiveness of the control measures that are in place for your health and safety.

What is involved in skin health surveillance?

It will be offered to all employees throughout the University who are identified, by risk assessment, as working with substances that may cause harm to the skin. It is repeated at 2 yearly intervals or more frequently, if required. A confidential skin questionnaire is completed and returned to the Occupational Health Service. The questionnaire will be assessed by an Occupational Health nurse who will advise you of any concerns with your health and with your consent advise your GP. Occupational Health will also advise your line manager on your fitness to work. No medical information will be passed to your department without your written consent and this is only requested when considered necessary for your health and safety.

Reports will be made to the departmental management with the consent of the employee, if changes in the work process are required to prevent or reduce skin problems. Anonymous statistical evidence from the programme should be used to guide managers on further improvement of control measures if problems are identified. Legislation requires that health surveillance health records are confidentially stored for 40 years after cessation of exposure or when an employee leaves the University.

What are the symptoms of urticaria?

If the skin comes into contact with an irritant, there may be an instant reaction. The symptoms are: itching, tingling or burning sensations, rash or hives with swelling (wheals). The itch and/or rash occur within minutes or up to an hour of contact. The symptoms disappear within 24 hours but usually within a few hours. Another type of urticaria is when a person has a reaction because of a sensitisation to a substance e.g. latex protein in gloves. There is no requirement to carry out health surveillance for urticaria but signs and symptoms should be reported to your line manager and discussed with Occupational Health who will monitor the symptoms as required.

Links: <http://www.hse.gov.uk/skin/images/urticaria.jpg>

What are the signs of skin cancer?

Skin cancer is the most common cancer in the UK. Most skin cancers are caused by sun exposure damage to the skin. If you are exposed at work to: UV rays from the sun from work outside; ionising and non-ionising radiation or some chemicals or unrefined mineral oils there is a risk of developing work-related skin cancer or add to the risk of developing cancers in other parts of the body. Work involving specific substances with a cancer risk may require health surveillance as determined by risk assessment. For UV exposure it is essential to carry out self- monitoring of the skin and if there are any concerns contact your GP and Occupational Health for further advice.

What can I do to check for early signs of cancer?

Try and get to know your skin and look out for normal moles and marks on your body so that you know if there have been any changes. See your GP if there are any changes and advise Occupational Health if you are concerned about the changes in your skin are work- related.

Links <http://www.hse.gov.uk/skin/employ/cancer.htm>

What else can I do? – Use the AVOID, PROTECT AND CHECK Approach (HSE)

- Work at a SAFE WORKING DISTANCE to prevent exposure and follow the safe systems of work in the risk assessments
- Use the control measures put in place to reduce the risk of harm to your skin such as personal protective equipment (PPE) - gloves and overalls to prevent skin contamination; cover up with long sleeves, wide brimmed hat and sun cream to prevent sun exposure
- Recognise the early signs and symptoms of any skin problems

- Report any symptoms to your supervisor and the Occupational Health Service as early as possible. If you think you have a work-related skin problem advise Occupational Health Service and they will advise you about getting the right treatment
- Attend the GP if you believe that you have a skin problem. Tell your GP what you do at work and that you think work it might be caused by or made worse by your work.

PRINCIPLES OF GOOD SKIN CARE

Take good care of your skin by paying particular attention to good hand hygiene techniques, appropriate use of gloves and use of conditioning (moisturising) creams.

- Take special care in hand washing. Wash your hands in lukewarm water if you have dermatitis. Make sure that you rinse your hands carefully to remove all traces of soaps and detergents, and dry them thoroughly, paying particular attention to the spaces between your fingers.
- Soap, detergents and water as well as other substances such as oils, metalworking fluids can collect under rings and make it difficult to have clean dry skin. It is best to avoid wearing finger rings at work. Wear only a plain wedding ring if you have to wear a ring at all, and take extra care to rinse and dry beneath it.
- Use conditioning (moisturising) creams frequently, throughout the day, to keep the skin well hydrated and which will prevent the skin from drying. Apply creams carefully and ensure that you include the spaces between your fingers.
- Use protective gloves when necessary for e.g. wet work and handling chemicals or potentially infectious materials. Make sure the gloves are clean, dry and intact with no holes.
- If you use gloves for periods longer than 10 minutes consider using clean cotton gloves liners. Only use gloves for as short a time as possible as gloves can make dermatitis worse.
- Your workplace should have adequate washing facilities away from areas used to prepare and eat food.
- Do not eat, drink or smoke in work areas
- Pre-work creams can help with cleaning substances from the skin and reduce the need for powerful skin cleanser. However, pre-work creams are not true 'barrier' creams as chemicals will always work their way through the cream to the skin.
- Cover cuts and abrasions with a waterproof dressing
- Apply the same standards of good skin care and appropriate use of gloves away from work.

GLOVES

Gloves form part of personal protective equipment (PPE) and are used frequently in combination with other control measures. PPE is often less effective and less reliable than other control measures and so care must be taken to:

- Select the correct glove for the task as gloves can for example, limit mobility, dexterity and may increase risk of entrapment when working with machinery.
- Select the correct glove for the hazardous substances being used.
- Select the correct size of glove for the employee ensuring forearms are protected – badly fitting or incorrect selection can increase the risk of exposure as contamination can occur
- Choose a glove that is compatible with the wearer, the work and other control measures.
- Choose gloves that are a snug fit, so that there are no wrinkles or folds that can get caught up in moving parts.
- Choose a glove material that will tear easily so that if it does get caught, the glove will rip rather than drag into the machinery such as nitrile, vinyl.
- Avoid the use of latex gloves due to sensitisation risk.
- It is important to monitor your skin for any signs of work-related skin problems when wearing any type of glove.

Further information is available from the Occupational Health Service, Level 2 Livingstone Tower, telephone 0141 548 4824, email occupationalhealth@strath.ac.uk