**Employers’ duties**

- Tell your employees about any substances they work with that can cause dermatitis and train them to use properly all controls measures provided.
- Provide thorough protective clothing, aprons, boots, face shields and gloves. Different types for different jobs to protect against different substances. Ask supplier or specialists for advice.
- Ensure protective clothing is replaced, cleaned and inspected regularly.
- Provide adequate washing facilities in the workplace.
- Keep your workplace clean, including machinery and tools.
- Use the smallest amount and most diluted chemicals as far as reasonably practicable.
Why me?

Occupational dermatitis does not simply cause skin inflammation. It can affect you for life and may even cause you to lose your job. If you are an employer and pay no attention to the issue, you may break the law and be fined or even put in jail. For your personal interest, you need to know about the health problems that can be caused by substances coming into contact with the skin at work.

What’s the problem?

Signs of occupational dermatitis are redness, itching, scaling and blistering. If the condition is allowed to get worse, the skin can crack and bleed and the dermatitis can spread all over the body. It can be bad enough to keep you off work and serious enough to force you to change job. Some people can be affected for life.

But if it is spotted early and adequate precautions are taken, most people will make a full recovery.

How is it caused?

Occupational dermatitis is caused by the skin coming into contact with certain substances at work. Because of this it is sometimes called “occupational contact dermatitis”. It is not infectious, so you will not get it from your colleagues. However, the problem is caused by a number of factors:

- the substance
- its strength and potency
- how often and how long it comes into contact with the skin

Some substances might affect you almost straight away; some might take weeks, months or even years to cause occupational dermatitis.

Dermatitis usually affects the hands or forearms, the places most likely to come into contact with the substance. But you can get it on your face, neck or chest from certain types of dusts, liquids and fumes. Dermatitis can even spread to parts of your body that have not been in contact with the substance. It can be very painful. But with a little care most cases can be prevented.

So what does it mean?

If you are an employee - it may affect your health, your livelihood, your family life and social life. Indeed, it can affect you for life. Your skin can become so damaged you might have to change job, possibly to a lower-paid one. Dermatitis affects your appearance, and although it isn’t contagious, some people think it is.

“...my social life had gone. I didn’t go out. I just refused to go out...”

A former paint mixer

If you are an employer - it can also affect your health, family life and social life. Worse still, you may be charged with breaking the law for not providing suitable protective measures to the worker and you could be fined or even jailed.

“I’ve had a business for 20 years. It was my life. I had to put it on the market which was something I didn’t want to do...”

A former hairdressing salon owner

1. Do we have a problem?

Have we skin problems? Do any of our workers have skin problems? If there are a few workers with skin problems, something at work might be causing it. Ask the workers if they have noticed any problems.

2. Do we know what we are using?

Read the labels and material safety data sheets of the substances. Look for the words ‘MAY CAUSE SKIN SENSITISATION’ or ‘IRRITATING TO SKIN’. Remember some things that cause dermatitis might not be labelled. Shampoos, some cleaning materials and some diluted metal working fluids do not carry these labels, but if you use them a lot over a long period of time, they can still cause dermatitis.

3. Can we use a safer alternative?

If we are using something that can cause dermatitis, can we use something safer? Try asking your trade association, suppliers or health specialists.

4. Can we do the job in a safer way?

Can we stop skin contact with the substance by automating the process or providing suitable tools, for example? If it is dust or fumes causing the dermatitis, some sort of exhaust ventilation might help.

Protect yourself

In some jobs there is nothing you can do to stop contact with substances that can cause dermatitis but there is still a lot you can do to protect yourself:

- Wearing the right sort of gloves helps. If the job does not permit wearing gloves all the time, at least wear them when you are handling substances that can cause dermatitis and remember to wash and change them frequently.

- Wash hands and use a moisturising cream before and after work. This will help to replace the natural oils your skin loses when you come into contact with detergents and solvents.

- Do not wash hands with gasoline or kerosene. Wash hands with suitable skin cleanser.

- Ventilation might help.

Wear gloves immediately after use. Otherwise, the contaminant may gradually degrade or permeate the glove.

Wear protective clothing.

Ask yourself:

- How many workers can I afford to lose?
- How much can I afford to spend training new workers?
- How many orders can I afford to lose just because I haven’t got the staff that day?

It can add up to an awful lot of money.

Look at this list. Do you work in any of these business sectors?

1. Catering
2. Construction
3. Printing
4. Health Care
5. Horticulture

These are the business sectors with the highest risk. But remember: dermatitis can affect people working in all sectors.

If you are an employer, ask your four final questions:

1. Do we have a problem?
2. Do we know what we are using?
3. Can we use a safer alternative?
4. Can we do the job in a safer way?

If we cannot use a safer alternative, can we do the job in a safer way? Can we stop skin contact with the substance by automating the process or providing suitable tools, for example? If it is dust or fumes causing the dermatitis, some sort of exhaust ventilation might help.