

- 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 cleaner.

- Wear protective coveralls, a face shield or a full-face mask if you do a job where liquids, fumes or dust that can cause dermatitis might contact your face and neck.

If chemicals can contaminate the whole body, full body protection is required, such as a face shield, coveralls and gloves.



- Keep your skin clean.
- Keep your workplace clean, including machinery and tools.
- Use the smallest amount and most diluted chemicals as far as reasonably practicable.

Providing washing facilities at convenient locations in the workplace helps employees to adopt good hygiene practice.



- Make sure your protective clothes are clean and intact.



Check the integrity of the gloves before use to ensure the effectiveness of protection.

Employers' duties

- Tell your employees about any substances they work with that can cause dermatitis and train them to properly use any control measures provided.
- Provide the right protective clothing, aprons, boots, face shields and gloves. There are different types for different jobs to protect against different substances. Ask suppliers or specialists for advice.
- Ensure protective clothing is replaced, cleaned and inspected regularly.
- Provide adequate washing facilities in the workplace.

Different jobs and different substances need different protective gloves. Choose carefully.



Skin checks - early warning signs

Regular skin checks can detect signs of dermatitis and allow for early medical intervention. An employer should set up a system of skin checks for workers who are likely to be in contact with substances that are known to cause severe dermatitis. Workers should cooperate with the employer and present for regular checks. If you ignore the problem, it might not go away: it could affect you for life.

As well as protecting your health, these checks also help to make sure that the systems in place to protect you are working. If a few workers start to show symptoms, something might be wrong. As an employer, you have to take immediate action, for example, providing new protective clothing.

You may consult a professional (for example, an occupational health doctor or nurse) on how to set up such a system and the frequency of checks required. Some workers may be trained on how to perform skin checks. They can then be assigned the duty regularly checking the skin of other workers for abnormal signs. As a worker, remember to report any skin problem to your manager immediately so that something can be done to minimise the adverse effect. You should also consult a doctor or attend the Occupational Health Clinic of the Labour Department for treatment. Remember to tell the doctor about the work you do and the substances you use.

"At their very worst my hands were covered in Vaseline and I just sat there. I couldn't bear one finger to touch another one. It was just too painful"

A former tiler

What the law says

Employer: According to the "Factories and Industrial Undertakings Ordinance" and the "Occupational Safety and Health Ordinance", an employer must, so far as reasonably practicable, ensure the safety and health of all his employees.

Under the two ordinances, there are also regulations to protect employees against occupational dermatitis.

Employee: An employee must, so far as reasonably practicable, care for the safety and health of himself and of other persons in the workplace. He or she must also co-operate with the employer as far as necessary to ensure that safety and health requirements are complied with.

Any employees who may have contracted dermatitis at work can visit the Occupational Health Clinics of the Labour Department for advice and treatment.

Kwun Tong Occupational Health Clinic
2/F Kwun Tong Jockey Club Health Centre,
457 Kwun Tong Road, Kowloon (Next to Kwun Tong MTR)
Tel.: 2343 7133

Sham Shui Po Occupational Health Clinic
4/F Celebrity Commercial Centre
64 Castle Peak Road, Sham Shui Po, Kowloon
Tel.: 2729 6500

Enquiry

- Telephone : 2852 4041 / 2437 1501
- Fax : 2581 2049 / 2415 4425
- E-mail : laboureq@labour.gcn.gov.hk

Prevention of Occupational Dermatitis

Guidelines for Employers and Employees



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.

How serious the problem is depends on a number of factors:

- the substance
- its strength and potency
- how often and how long it contacts the skin

Some substances might affect you almost the first day you use them; 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 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 be

A former hairdressing salon owner

Ask yourself:

- How many workers can I afford to lose?
- How much can I afford to spend training new workers?
- How many days sickness a year can I afford my workers to have ?
- How many orders can I afford to lose just because I haven't got the staff that days?

It can add up to an awful lot of money.

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

- Hairdressing/beauty
- Cleaning
- Engineering
- Chemical
- Agriculture/horticulture
- Catering
- Construction
- Printing
- Health Care

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

"My hands were all cuts and blisters. I had to get my boyfriend to help me eat because I couldn't hold a pair of chopsticks and a bowl - couldn't grip anything

A former apprentice hairdresser

Clues of the problem

If you are an employer, ask yourself four questions:

1. Do we have a problem?
Do we have skin problems? Do any of our workers have a skin problem? 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, supplies or health specialists.
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.

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 can help. 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 gloves immediately after use. Otherwise, the contaminant may gradually degrade or permeate the gloves.

