



Toolbox Talk: Occupational Dermatitis

Dermatitis is a general term referring to skin inflammation due to an exposure to irritants. The severity of dermatitis ranges from a slight reddening of the skin to a rash with extreme itching to pain, swelling, and the formation of blisters.

The two most common forms of occupational dermatitis are irritant contact dermatitis and allergic dermatitis. Irritant contact dermatitis is caused by substances, such as industrial chemicals, which produce skin inflammation on contact and generally only in the area of the contact. Examples of irritants include acids, solvents and strong soaps or detergents.

A person with allergic dermatitis has developed sensitivity to a substance, such as poison ivy, rubber or nickel. This sensitivity may develop after a brief exposure or over several years. Some substances, such as latex gloves, can induce both irritant contact dermatitis and allergic dermatitis. Preventing dermatitis is more effective than treating it. Preventive measures can include engineering controls, protective clothing and good housekeeping. Engineering controls should ALWAYS provide the first barrier between hazards and employees. Whenever possible, less hazardous chemicals should be substituted for more dangerous materials. Tools which allow workers to hold the work piece without having to immerse their hands in process chemicals is another example. Automating a process is another effective means to eliminate employee contact with hazards.

Personal protective equipment is a secondary means of preventing dermatitis. Gloves, aprons, long-sleeved shirts, face shields and boots all reduce the risk of exposure, but they must be selected based on the type of exposure.

Chemical protective clothing manufacturers have charts and software to assist in making the correct selection based on the chemical and the exposure potential.

Personal hygiene is critical in preventing dermatitis. Employees should wash after exposure to chemicals and routinely before eating, drinking, smoking and at the end of their shift. An industrial hygienist or occupational physician can be consulted on the best way to cleanse the skin. Harsh cleansers or solvents may worsen rather than lessen the problem.

If someone is exposed to a contact or allergic irritant, have them wash the area immediately with mild soap and water. Apply anti-inflammatory creams if desired. In severe cases, the individual should consult a physician.

Discussion Topics:

- Identify contact and allergic irritants at your facility.
- Discuss methods in place to prevent employee exposure to irritants.

Anyone have a question or comment about Occupational Dermatitis? Please be sure to sign-in on the training certification form.

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