



## 24.1 Occupational Dermatitis: A Guide for Exposed Employees

### Introduction

Occupational Dermatitis is an inflammation of the skin caused by irritating or sensitising substances at work. The symptoms include:

- Red flaky skin.
- Itching and irritation.
- Weeping from cracked skin or blisters.
- Sores, which may become infected.

### What causes Occupational Dermatitis?

There are many substances known to cause dermatitis.

These fall into two Main categories:

- Irritants
- Sensitisers.

It is nearly impossible to tell which type of dermatitis is present just by observing the affected area as they look almost identical.

### Primary Irritants

If a substance is in contact with the skin for sufficient time, then it can cause contaminated skin to become inflamed. This rash is referred to as **Irritant** Contact Dermatitis.

### Sensitisers

Not everyone will become sensitised to these chemicals. They affect only a small portion of workers that are exposed. Symptoms may

not appear immediately and can appear on areas of skin that were not directly contaminated.

Once a person has become **sensitised** to the substance, they will probably remain so.

This problem is referred to as **Allergic** Contact Dermatitis.

### Prevention

It is easier to prevent dermatitis than to cure it. The basic aim of prevention is to eliminate contact between the irritant or sensitiser and the skin using a variety of methods.

*If it doesn't touch the skin, it can't cause a problem.*





## Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Considered a “last resort” control, this equipment might include overalls, aprons, gloves, footwear, leggings and faceguards of various kinds. Your employer should ensure that PPE is appropriate to both the risk, the user and the job. They should train you on how to use and care for this equipment.

## Personal Hygiene

Hygiene plays a critical role in preventing dermatitis. Employees should wash contaminated skin immediately and ensure that the affected areas are clean and dry afterwards. Contaminated clothing is a major cause of workplace dermatitis. It should be removed and either laundered or discarded.

## Care of Skin

Avoid the use of aggressive, gritty soaps where at all possible. Liquid soap should be used, except where the skin is heavily contaminated. If you habitually need to use aggressive cleansing products, you should ask your employer to review your work processes and PPE allocation. Engineering out the problem is the correct way to approach this problem, not scrubbing.

The use of **conditioning (after work) creams**, after washing, is an excellent way of maintaining healthy skin. They replace natural skin oils that may be lost from contamination and washing and help the skin to remain flexible and waterproof.

## Health Surveillance

As part of the way that your company manages skin risks, they should arrange for regular skin checks to be undertaken by either a designated & competent person either from the business, or by an Occupational Health professional. Any work-related skin problems identified as part of this programme should be referred to a medical or Occupational Health professional for assessment and advice. Employees are legally obliged to comply with such programmes were deemed necessary by the company’s risk assessment.

## Work Creams

Except for **conditioning (after work) creams**, other types of work cream, such as barrier creams are no longer routinely recommended for the following reasons:

- They provide little protection against many chemicals and are washed off easily.
- They are difficult to apply properly.
- They are rarely applied often enough.
- They wear off almost immediately.
- They promote a false sense of security whilst offering little actual protection.
- Employees often cite their use as an excuse to not wear appropriate PPE.

## Further Information

Specific information about work related skin disease can be found at: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/skin/>

A copy of this & other documentation can be found from <https://mohs.co.uk/resources> or using the QR code at the top of this page.