Let's Cut Out Dermatitis

Take Care of your skin at work

Occupational dermatitis affects many people working in many industries, including hairdressers and beauty therapist. Hairdressers are 17 times and beauticians (primarily nail technicians) are 15 times more likely to develop dermatitis than any other group of workers.

Dermatitis is caused by contact with chemicals present in hairdressing products and prolonged contact with water. It is also caused by contact with liquid and powder acrylic nail systems and UV nails as well as solvents.

What is occupational dermatitis?

Dermatitis is an inflammatory condition of the skin. It is not infectious so cannot be passed from person to person but it does cause personal suffering and is unsightly and unpleasant. Overall dermatitis is bad for business (cost of sickness, absence, staff turnover, loss of clients and risk of legal action). Skin symptoms include: - redness, itching, scaling and blistering. If the condition gets worse then the skin can crack and bleed.

In hairdressing and beauty therapies it is usually the hands and forearms that are affected. It can develop at any time, or not at all – everyone is different. The hands are the most commonly affected. Other areas, which may become affected, are the arms, face, eyes and neck although other parts of the body can also be affected, such as the nails in severe cases. There are 2 types of dermatitis; irritant contact dermatitis and allergic contact dermatitis.

Common causes of irritant contact dermatitis are bleaching agents, permanent wave solutions, shampoos, wet work – primarily hair washing. Irritant contact dermatitis can be acute or chronic.

- Acute – Develops after a few contacts with strong chemicals e.g. bleach.
- Chronic – Frequent wet working or frequent exposure to milder chemicals like shampoo

Common causes of allergic contact dermatitis are dyes, perfumes, cosmetics, epoxy and acrylic resins, paraphenylenediamine (PPD).

Allergic dermatitis is a specific response of the immune system to a particular substance or component of the substance. It results in the individual being sensitised and can develop quickly after only a few contacts with shampoo, colours or acrylates. It can often take months or years for the sensitisation or allergy to develop.
Prevention

Following a few simple precautions can prevent occupational dermatitis. In general, control measures required are simple, low cost and easy to put in place:

AVOID exposure to chemicals and excess wet work.
PROTECT your skin by wearing gloves. Specifically be sure to: wear single use gloves, take glove breaks, dry hands thoroughly and apply moisturisers regularly.
CHECK your skin regularly for any early signs of dryness and cracking.

Practical steps to take

1. Find out if there is a problem
   - Do workers come into contact with substances that could cause dermatitis?
   - Monitor sickness and absence due to skin problems
   - Investigate worker complaints and talk to your staff

2. Decide what to do
   - What is the cause and how many are affected?
   - Can the cause of the problem be removed?
   - Can the cause of the problem be substituted with something better e.g. by replacing a high concentration soap/detergent with a milder one?
   - Can contact with the substance or item be prevented in another way e.g. by not touching a product or by wearing gloves, remember some people are sensitive to rubber and latex glove materials.
   - Consider providing after work moisturising cream to help replace natural oils the skin can lose when washed or in contact with detergent.
   - Decide what other control measures are required to prevent workers getting dermatitis, e.g. job rotation or alternative duties.

3. Monitoring
   - Monitor the situation to make sure that your control measures are effective.
   - Consider the need to provide simple health surveillance by a responsible person to enquire about symptoms of dermatitis.

4. Training and information for workers
   Explain to staff:
   - The causes of dermatitis
   - How to minimise the risks by using the control measures you have identified
   - How to recognise early symptoms and the need to examine the skin on a regular basis
   - The importance of reporting the symptoms immediately

Safety data sheets

Safety data sheets contain information to help you make a risk assessment. The safety data sheet itself is not a risk assessment but it will describe the hazards, helping you to judge the probability of the hazards arising in your workplace. Your supplier is responsible for providing accurate safety data sheets for specified chemicals.
Sites for useful information

A site which is an excellent source of information and was the source for the above information is the Health & Safety Executive website (www.hse.gov.uk).

- INDG 233 – Preventing dermatitis at work: advice for employers and employees.
- INDG 353 – Why do I need a safety data sheet?
- MS24 – Medical aspects of occupational skin disease.
- Visit the HSE web pages dedicated to skin health: www.hse.gov.uk/skin
- Use the free on-line assessment guide for hazardous substances: www.coshh-essentials.org.uk