Sensitizers Can Produce Serious Skin Problems

Contact with certain substances at work can give you a bad reaction on your skin. These reactions usually affect your hands and forearms, the parts of your body most likely to be in contact with the substance.

Early signs of these skin problems include dryness, redness and itching. The skin may become swollen, cracked, scaly and thickened. Blisters may develop.

How fast a skin reaction develops depends on the strength of the substance and how long and how often it touches your skin. Skin problems often diminish when you are away from work, on weekends or vacations.

Over-exposure to liquids, including water, can break down your skin’s natural defense barrier by stripping away natural oils. Exposure to heat, cold and sun also can contribute to skin problems involving substances.

An allergic reaction is an over-reaction of the body’s immune system to a harmful substance. When repeated exposure to a substance causes an allergic response, the substance is called a sensitizer.

There are two different kinds of skin sensitizers. One kind is chemical. The other kind is protein found in natural materials. Sometimes allergens cause skin symptoms when inhaled or ingested. And, the other way around, skin contact with some allergens can cause respiratory allergic reactions.

Occupations ranging from plastics manufacturing to cashiering, from hair dressing to healthcare, can expose workers to sensitizers.

The following are examples of sensitizers encountered in the workplace:

- Metals, including nickel, chromium and cobalt.
- Resins and plastics, including epoxy.
- Dyes used in manufacturing textiles, disinfectants, fragrances in cleaning agents, drugs, antibiotics, preservatives in metal working fluids, solvents and industrial enzymes are some of the chemical sensitizers.

Protein in natural materials include rubber latex used in making gloves and medical equipment, proteins found in animal dander, and plant materials handled by farmers, florists and food industry workers.

Skin contact with sensitizing substances can be prevented with devices such as exhaust ventilation, splash guards and screens provided by your employer. Tongs and other equipment also can be used to keep you from touching the substance.

You need to wear the correct protective equipment, such as gloves, face shields, respirators and boots made of acceptable protective materials and fitted properly. You also need to be trained to use and care for this equipment so it will provide the protection you need.

As well, you need training in the correct way to protect your skin before you work, cleanse your skin as you work and care for your skin after work.

When you become sensitized to a certain substance, you experience an allergic reaction when you come into contact with it. This reaction can be so serious you have to avoid the substance altogether. This can mean a change of career and a drastic lifestyle change. For example, the metal nickel, commonly used in alloys with other metals, is a sensitizer. Persons seriously affected cannot tolerate contact with jewelry, scissors, eating utensils and other common items.