Skin Protection Meeting Kit

WHAT'S AT STAKE

The skin is the single largest organ of the body. When healthy, our skin protects us from chemical, physical, and biological hazards. Skin weighs about 10 percent of our total body weight and is approximately one eighth of an inch thick. The skin is made up of two layers, the epidermis (outer layer) and the dermis (inner layer). The outer layer of skin is only 1/250th of an inch thick and is the part of our skin that forms the protective barrier.

WHAT'S THE DANGER

SKIN DANGERS AT WORK. One out of every four workers may be exposed to something that will irritate the skin. Many different things may cause skin damage. When something penetrates through the outer layer, the inner layer of skin reacts to it. Strong, or regularly repeated irritations of the skin may lead to skin diseases.

What Is Dermatitis? Dermatitis is the term used to describe skin inflammation. Contact Dermatitis (also known as eczema) occurs as a result of repeated contact with substances that cause either irritation (Irritant Contact Dermatitis – ICD) or specific sensitization (Allergic Contact Dermatitis -ACD). Any job that either involves frequent hand washing or in direct contact with certain products (e.g., gloves) or chemicals can cause dermatitis.

The main feature of dermatitis is dry, red, and itchy skin. Swelling, flaking, blistering, cracking and pain may follow. Symptoms can vary from being a minor discomfort to becoming a painful and inconvenient problem.

SUBSTANCES AT WORK THAT CAUSE DERMATITIS

- solvents used in paints, glues, or other surface coatings.
- chemicals
- biological agents, e.g., plants, bacteria, and fungi

- frequent contact with water, e.g., more than two hours a day
- repeated friction and/or mechanical abrasion
- alcohols, degreasers, coolants, and detergents
- disinfectants, petroleum products, soaps, and cleaners

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

SKIN PROTECTION

- When using gloves or clothing to protect yourself and your skin, you should be careful when removing contaminated clothing, so as not to contaminate yourself.
- Hand washing is an important component of the skin care routine for contact dermatitis and eczema. Washing with very hot water is damaging to the skin, warm or cool water is preferred. Excessive amounts of hand washing can also aggravate eczema and cause the development of irritant contact dermatitis.
- If a worker is exposed or thinks he/she may have been exposed to a hazardous substance, the area should be rinsed for at least 15 minutes. If a worker is accidentally contaminated, he or she should shower immediately and remove the clothing while showering. Certain substances can be absorbed quickly across the skin. Time is critical. Medical help should be obtained immediately.

GENERAL GLOVE USE AND ADVICE AT WORK

- If your hands get sweaty under gloves, wear some cotton gloves inside (cotton-lined gloves are not as good), as they help absorb the sweat. These can then be washed and re-used.
- If you get a hole in the gloves, throw them out.
- Avoid wearing natural rubber latex gloves which are powdered, as they can cause allergy.
- Wear gloves that fit correctly, i.e., not too big, or small.
- Wear the right gloves for the task being performed, as not all gloves are suitable for all tasks.
- A fabric glove will be helpful for dry tasks, but a waterproof glove will be needed for other tasks.

- Always use protective gloves when dipping your hands into parts cleaner.§ Consult a glove manufacturer to find out what gloves are best for the tasks you are performing or to protect against the chemicals you are using.
- Do not wash or re-use disposable gloves.
- Do not share gloves with co-workers.

BEST GENERAL PRECAUTIONS TO PREVENT SKIN PROBLEMS

- Keep your workplace clean.
- Store all chemicals safely and label them correctly.
- Use proper waste containers.
- Keep eye baths and safety showers available.
- Have an MSDS for every dangerous substance used in your work.
- Wear protective items, such as gloves, aprons, hats, masks, long-sleeved shirts, and pants.
- Wear clean clothes to work. Take off oil- or chemical-soaked work clothes before leaving.
- Do not clean your hands or other skin areas with any chemicals or mineral spirits.
- After washing your hands, protect them with lotion, cream, or petroleum jelly.
- Know your workplace’s safety processes. For instance, what do you do if your skin comes in contact with a harmful substance? Know how to get it off your skin and how to get medical help.
- Do not eat, drink, or smoke in your work area. This can bring chemicals in close contact with your skin.
- If you work outside, apply sunscreen throughout the day. You also should wear sunglasses, a wide-brimmed hat, and clothing that covers your body.
- See if you can use a tool—instead of your hands—to handle dangerous materials.

FINAL WORD

The skin plays an extremely important role as a barrier to chemicals and other contaminants entering the body. Skin disorders

like occupational skin disease may disrupt this barrier function.