



EUROPEAN ACADEMY OF
DERMATOLOGY AND VENEREOLOGY

Information Leaflet for Patients

OCCUPATIONAL SKIN DISEASES

The aim of this leaflet

This leaflet is designed to help you understand more about occupational skin diseases (namely contact dermatitis/eczema). It tells you what this condition is, what causes it, what can be done for treatment/prevention, and practical advice for managing this condition.

OCCUPATIONAL SKIN DISEASES

What causes occupational skin diseases (particularly contact dermatitis)?

Almost 90% of skin disorders are acquired at the workplace. Most frequently this is *contact dermatitis*, caused by direct contact with one or various hazardous substances at the workplace, with the hands and forearms being the most affected body sites. Relevant occupational risk factors are exposure to water, multiple irritants (substances that directly damage the outer layer of the skin) and allergens (substances that cause the immune system to respond in a way that affects the skin) contained in cleaning products, hair dyes, organic solvents, resins, metalworking fluids, cement and other chemicals, and some plants.

Who is at risk for developing contact dermatitis?

If you are working in healthcare, dentistry, hairdressing, the beauty industry, metal industry, construction, manufacturing, cleaning, food production, agriculture, printing, or in janitorial services, then you are at higher risk of acquiring such a skin disorder. Genetics can equally play a role as atopic individuals, who have a pre-disposition of developing an hypersensitivity reaction, are more prone to developing *contact dermatitis*.

What does it look like and what are the typical signs and symptoms?

Typical signs and symptoms are redness, swelling, blistering, flaking, cracking, and itching of your skin. Sometimes the signs are immediate (within hours or just a few days), and sometimes they are not (as the effects can be cumulative).

If you can avoid being re-exposed to the substance responsible for the reaction, your skin will usually recover within a few days or weeks. However, if you are continuously exposed over a long period of time to the hazardous substance at the workplace, you may experience severe and long-lasting symptoms which can impact your work ability and affect your quality of life. Treatment is therefore important and can prevent your skin from worsening and help it heal.

Can the disease be treated or prevented?

Most forms of *eczema* (inflamed skin) can be successfully prevented. If proper protective measures are in place, workers with contact dermatitis can usually remain on the job. Before detailed advice on improved skin protection is given, you should consult a dermatologist and undergo a careful patch testing to find out which substances and materials you are allergic or reactive to. Preventive measures include avoidance of direct contact with the hazardous substances by using gloves (which have to be carefully and individually chosen), use of proper hand-washing agents, use of non-irritating, non-allergenic skin cleansers, and application of emollients, hand lotions, and creams after hand-washing. In some countries, individually-tailored instructions on the use of gloves, protective creams, and skin care are offered in the framework of multidisciplinary seminars. Some countries offer in-patient rehabilitation for workers severely affected by contact dermatitis.

If your skin develops the above-mentioned signs and symptoms, then you should consult a dermatologist and explain when the symptoms started and under which conditions (e.g. at work, etc.). Based on a detailed diagnosis, including identification of the causes of your skin problems, a proper treatment can be initiated.

Depending on the severity of the skin disorder, temporary sick leave of the affected worker may be necessary.



Fig. 1-3 Photographs of *contact dermatitis*

What is my employer's role, and what is the national legislation in European countries?

In accordance with EU safety and health regulations, employers should adequately control exposure to materials in the workplace that cause poor health. This includes controlling exposure to materials that cause skin diseases, and to materials that enter the body through the skin and cause problems elsewhere. The employer should assess the risk and undertake regular health surveillance checks. Proper personal protective equipment such as appropriate gloves, soaps, and creams, should also be made available to workers. Also, instructions to workers regarding the use of personal protective equipment are mandatory (e.g. to use single-use gloves only once).

Occupational skin diseases are recognised as an occupational disease in most European countries. Therefore, if you are diagnosed with *contact dermatitis* due to your work, your employer should be informed as they have to report it to the responsible authorities for insurance reasons. If you are significantly affected by skin disorders, you may be entitled to a special kind of disability benefit (workman's compensation/occupational accident and injury insurance) and retraining. Depending on the severity of the disease, there are still some people who have to change jobs because of their *contact dermatitis*, although this is increasingly unusual in countries where successful prevention strategies have been implemented.

Unfortunately, occupational skin disorders are still often under-reported because their association with the workplace is not recognized by physicians, employers, or workers themselves.

What is practical advice for managing occupational skin diseases?

Practical ways to manage occupational skin diseases include:

- Avoidance of direct contact with materials that cause these conditions,
- Personal hygiene,
- Skin protection through the use of appropriate protective clothing/gloves,
- Regular skin checks for early detection,
- Use of protective creams and emollients before and after work. ■