

OCCUPATIONAL SKIN DISEASE

THE BASICS

CLEANERS ARE AT RISK

WHAT CAUSES WORK-RELATED SKIN DISEASE IN CLEANERS?

Work-related skin disease can be caused by contact with chemicals such as those used for cleaning (e.g. detergents, degreasers, disinfectants, sanitizers, soaps, solvents) and wet work. Wet work is when the hands are repeatedly wet for long periods while working.

Cleaners who do wet work with waterproof gloves are still at risk; moisture can get trapped inside the gloves and harm the skin.

Repeated physical abrasion/rubbing of the skin (i.e. from cleaning with sponges/rags) and exposure to biological sources (e.g., bacteria, fungi, viruses, plants) can also cause work-related dermatitis.

WHAT CAN HAPPEN TO A WORKER'S SKIN?

- Irritation of the skin leading to irritant contact dermatitis
- Sensitization of skin leading to allergic contact dermatitis
- Other effects such as chemical burns (e.g. ammonia, bleach)

WHAT ACTIVITIES CAN PUT A WORKER AT RISK?

- Immersing hands in chemicals used for cleaning and/or water
- Touching contaminated work pieces and/or contaminated work surfaces (such as sponges/rags, containers of cleaning products)
- Splashing (e.g. when liquid or powdered cleaning products are mixed or handled)
- Depositing from air (e.g. when sweeping up powdered chemical spills)
- Friction from tasks involving heavy use of the hands (e.g. scrubbing with sponges/rags)

EMPLOYER DUTIES

Employers have a legal obligation to reduce their workers' risk of skin damage as far as is reasonably practicable, by preventing exposure to substances that are known to cause irritation or allergy.

This means identifying jobs or tasks that are likely to cause dermatitis, putting in place appropriate control measures, and informing employees about the risk of dermatitis wherever appropriate.