



Housekeeping

by Jesse Denton

Preventing dermatitis in housekeeping and engineering personnel

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What is the body organ a person sees every day, couldn't live without, yet often treats badly? It measures 17 square feet, weighs 6 pounds, and is the body's largest organ. It's your skin.

Damage to the skin can be a serious health hazard. It is the body's first line of defense against bacteria, and the skin blocks the passage of the disease germs and harmful chemical substances. The skin acts as a thermostat assisting the central nervous system and regulating body temperature automatically. It is a cleaning agent that gets rid of much of the body waste. It secretes oils to keep itself soft and pliable. The skin handles a third of the body's circulating blood. Its millions of nerve fibers transmit messages to the central nervous system, which makes a person move instantly to avoid cuts, burns, and other physical threats. It renews itself, growing new cells, junking old ones. It is a vital part of our body that often is neglected or abused, especially when exposed to environmental irritants and caustic materials in the workplace.

Dermatitis

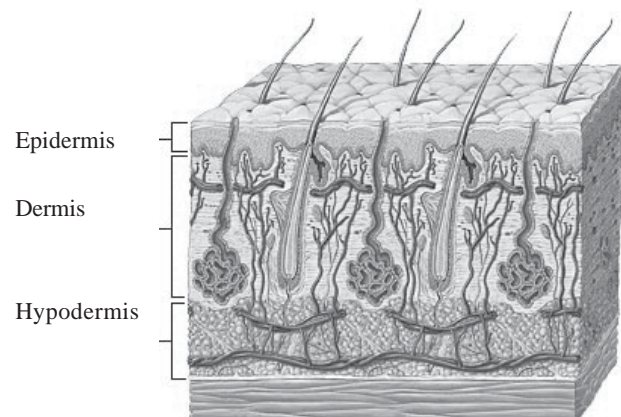
Hotel employees most likely to be affected by skin ailments include housekeeping and engineering personnel as well as stewarding and culinary employees. Diseases of the skin are the most common of all occupational diseases and should be taken seriously. Skin diseases are most often referred to as dermatitis, which is an inflammation of the skin. The Bureau of Labor statistics under the OSHA act states that about 40% of occupational diseases are dermatitis related. This is by far the leading type of occupation illnesses reported.

Heat or cold are not the major cause of skin disorder problems at work. While heat, cold, moisture, or electricity can be a reason for dermatitis, chemicals used in the workplace are the major contributing factor resulting in dermatitis.

Many of the chemicals used within lodging facilities are powerful enough to be hazardous to the employees that work with them. If used incorrectly or without proper safety precautions, employees can easily develop skin disorders. For example, a room attendant will work with at least five different chemicals for each guestroom she cleans: toilet cleaner, spray disinfectant, glass cleaner, floor cleaner, wood cleaner/polishing agent. Engineers and maintenance personnel will likely come into contact with cleaning solvents, lubricating agents, fuels and oils, coolants and refrigerants, and much more. Food and beverage staff will work with copper and silver polishes, dishwashing detergents, and sterilizing agents. Laundry personnel will be exposed to pre-spotting agents, soaps and detergents, surfactants and alkalis, softeners and starches, and possibly dry cleaning chemicals. Obviously, there is no shortage of chemicals within a hotel.

An important factor in determining how a chemical substance is being abused is to review how it is handled and used. No matter how toxic or hazardous a material may be, given proper safeguards and controls, it can be used safely. Hence, it the responsibility of each supervisor to train every employee in the safe uses of the chemicals they work with, and more importantly, require these employees to always follow appropriate safety procedures, including wearing personal protective equipment when handling chemicals.

Some people will develop a skin disease or dermatitis from an exposure that will have little or no effect on another person working under exactly the same conditions. There are other factors that can contribute or cause dermatitis problems. These include such things as age, skin type, allergies, and





pre-existing skin infections. As a general rule, people with fair complexions often are more susceptible than people with darker skin pigmentation. Older people tend to have thinner, drier skin and may be more susceptible. There are many factors that can contribute or cause a problem. The fact that only one or two people may be affected while the rest of the department working under the same conditions are not affected, does not make it any less of a real problem.

Working with chemicals

If it is necessary to mix a caustic or acid with water, always add chemical into the water. Never mix or pour the water into the chemical. Doing so can result in splattering or heat generation which can cause a serious burn injury to the skin. Again, always wear the proper personal protective equipment while handling any acid or dangerous caustic type materials. This would include face shields, drip resistant goggles, as well as protective clothing on exposed parts of the body.

A good practice to help prevent skin problems from occurring is to have employees wash frequently and thoroughly. This is a very important step in preventing dermatitis and skin problems. All employees should wash frequently with mild soap and water to ensure that there is no residual on the skin. It is equally important that employees do not use solvents or other material of this nature to clean their skin. It is also important to take care in washing work clothes frequently to prevent residuals from accumulating in the fabric and being absorbed into the skin.

Skin injuries from chemicals

If an employee should spill a corrosive material on their skin, the general rule is to rinse with plenty of running water. This doesn't mean to run water over the skin for 30 seconds or so and then take a leisurely trip to the first aid station. Rather, if the corrosive material is that highly caustic or corrosive, flush the affected area with running water for at least 15 minutes to be certain no residual remains. The amount of time necessary to rinse the material may vary, but it should be for a prolonged period of time.

Injuries from chemicals do not always occur immediately. A person may be exposed to a chemical cleaner or substance over a period of time before having a reaction. About 20% of dermatitis cases are caused by a chemical action called "sensitizing". This means that certain chemicals may appear harmless to an individual at first but produces a reaction after a number of contacts. Some of the common types of materials that cause this type of reaction are dyes, some soaps and cleaning materials, insecticides, cosmetics and oils. Hotel managers and employees alike should realize that it is possible for an individual to be exposed to various kinds of materials for a prolonged period of time before any kind of problem develops.

Being away from a substance which has affected an employee for a few days until the dermatitis improves does not mean it is safe to send the person back to work and use this same material. As discussed above, it is possible for an employee to be near a material for quite a while before a problem develops. In addition, it may be necessary to transfer the affected worker so he will not be exposed to the agent again. They may constantly have the reoccurring problems if they are continuously exposed to the offending agent. Managers should be very cautious when they send afflicted employees back into the work environment after they have developed a dermatitis problem. During this reintroduction process, employees should be instructed to report any additional problems immediately. If possible, provide some kind of protective materials for them, such as gloves or protective creams or lotions.

Conclusion

These are a few of the basic important considerations while working with any kind of chemical, caustic, or cleaning agent. If the materials are used properly, there is little danger or hazard to the individuals involved. The major share of our problems develop when the materials are not used according to instructions or they are mixed with other type of cleaning materials or chemicals which may be incompatible. If some of the basic points we just reviewed above are kept in mind, we can avoid most of these problems. Now share this important information with your staff members; then give them the enclosed ten question true/false quiz to test their learning comprehension on dermatitis/skin disorders in the workplace. ✧

(Jesse Denton is an independent loss prevention consultant based in Atlanta, GA. He possesses over 40 years of experience, the last 22 years with major hotel and insurance companies in the hospitality industry. Jesse was honored in February 2009 by HospitalityLawyer.com with the Hospitality Loss Prevention Lifetime Achievement award. He may be reached via E-mail at: jldentonjr@bellsouth.net.)

Where to go for information about chemicals

All associates should also be aware of the location of the Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) for their department and of the different sections of the MSDS. Especially important is the proper usage and storage of the chemicals, personal protective measures and equipment, and recommended first aid procedures.

