Dermatitis-It’s Not Just a Little Rash

Dermatitis is an inflammation or irritation of the skin that is caused most often by contact with chemicals. It is the single most common occupational disease in the United States, with estimates of more than a million occurrences.

Most people simply laugh off the seriousness of the problem, thinking of it as "just a little skin rash—big deal!" But some workers have been laid up for several years because of dermatitis. The disease may also be a surface symptom of a greater problem, such as internal systemic poisoning when highly toxic chemicals are involved.

Most mild dermatitis cases involve itching, dryness, or redness of the affected skin, due to the removal of the skin’s natural oils by some irritating agent. In more severe dermatitis attacks, the skin may crack from excessive dryness, or the surface of the skin may become scaly or crusty. Contact with certain corrosive substances can lead to the destruction of skin and other soft tissues. In the later stages of dermatitis, the sores can be very
Chemicals are the largest single source of contact dermatitis. Soaps and detergents can cause dryness and cracking. Dust from certain metals can trigger an allergic reaction or even cause ulcers on the skin. Acids and bases are capable of causing immediate burns. Organic solvents and pesticides can also cause skin irritation.

Environmental factors such as excessive heat or cold, low humidity, or sunlight are potential irritants.

Biological agents such as bacteria, fungi, viruses, and toxic plants can cause dermatitis as well.

Other causes can include high energy sources such as electricity, artificial ultraviolet light, X rays, laser radiation, and radium.

Individual sensitivities among people can account for different reactions to the same exposures. Some people may be sensitive or allergic to certain substances. Once an allergy develops, it will decline or disappear if there is no further contact with the irritant. But, if contact cannot be avoided, the skin of the entire body can suffer an allergic attack and the allergy might last a lifetime.

The key to preventing dermatitis is to limit your exposure to potentially irritating substances. Good housekeeping is one way to control exposure. Make sure your work clothes, lunch area, and work area are clean. Don’t put contaminated work gloves in
your toolbox or lunch box. If you spill something, clean it up right away.

Before working with chemicals, always consult the material safety data sheet (MSDS) for that chemical and the warning label on the container. If it is an irritant, check to see what the MSDS recommends in the way of gloves and other protective clothing.

Barrier creams can provide some protection against mild irritants such as greases or oils, but should not take the place of gloves when handling highly caustic or corrosive substances. Using your protective clothing consistently is the best possible method of limiting exposure and avoiding dermatitis. If contact does occur, wash the irritants off the skin immediately with a nonirritating soap and large amounts of water. Keep work clothes as clean as possible and wash them separately from other clothing.

Mild cases of dermatitis can be treated with over-the-counter hydrocortisone creams to help relieve itching and rashes. If the condition does not clear up within a week to 10 days, consult a medical professional for help.

Dermatitis is not necessarily a life-threatening condition, but it almost always is annoying and is often more than "just a little skin rash." The best cure for dermatitis is to stop it before it starts.
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