

## The Importance of Health and Safety in the Kitchen Environment –

### Dermatitis

In the last edition of the e-news, we looked at the safe use of knives in the kitchen environment. In this edition, we will look at occupational dermatitis. This is a skin condition which can be brought on by exposure to outside agents which can cause skin to be inflamed, irritated, cracked and sore.

Although it may be a less obvious health and safety risk compared to the use of kitchen equipment such as knives, it is of particular relevance to both the care sector and catering operations.

According to the **HSE**, the food and catering industries account for about 10% of the estimated 84,000 people each year who suffer from dermatitis which is either caused or made worse by their work.

Contact dermatitis is the most common form of work-related skin disease suffered by health and social care professionals, and accounts for 13% of the occupational diseases reported to HSE under **RIDDOR** across industry as a whole. It is therefore crucial that employers understand the risks, and where possible raise awareness and encourage good practices to avoid an employee developing dermatitis.

#### **Risks**

Dermatitis can be caused or exacerbated in the kitchen environment by contact with chemical agents used in commonplace kitchen products such as washing up liquid, soap and surface cleaners which are used for routine tasks such as washing dishes and cleaning benches.

The need to maintain high levels of hygiene and cleanliness in food preparation areas means that these sorts of tasks are likely to be carried out repeatedly, increasing the level of risk to employees.

The key risk of not managing the risk of occupational dermatitis properly, is that employees will be more likely to suffer from a painful skin condition which may prevent them from being able to carry out their role effectively, or indeed at all.

#### **Managing risks**

In addition to employers' general duties under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety Regulations 1999, employers have specific duties under the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations 2002.

In summary, **COSHH** requires employers to prevent or reduce exposure to hazardous substances by carrying out a risk assessment in relation to any potentially hazardous substances, providing control measures (and ensuring they are implemented), providing appropriate information and training and carrying out health surveillance where appropriate.

The **HSE** provides a case study of an employee in a school kitchen who developed dermatitis and was forced to take sick leave.

It appeared that the dermatitis had been caused by her involvement in routine kitchen activities such as washing up, wiping surfaces and washing her hands. Her employer already had a number of control measures in place, such as providing cotton liners to wear underneath standard washing up gloves.

After considerable investigation, it emerged that the underlying issues were that she was sensitive to plant materials, (especially lettuce), and that she did not always wear gloves while wiping down surfaces, which meant she was being exposed to washing up detergent.

She was able to return to work, with close monitoring of her skin condition and some additional control measures in place, such as ensuring she was able to avoid handling lettuce.

This allowed both her and her employer to avoid any further absence and allowed the employer to learn lessons for dealing with any similar issues which might arise in the future.

There are some simple low cost steps which employers can take to help reduce the risk of dermatitis occurring:

- conduct a review of chemicals used within the kitchen and look at substituting any corrosive or hazardous substances for less harmful alternatives where possible;
- ensure that any potentially hazardous substances used or stored in the kitchen are stored safely and labelled correctly;
- where risks have been identified, implement appropriate control measures such as providing staff with appropriate PPE to ensure that exposure is limited, and providing pre and after work barrier creams;
- provide appropriate training and promote safe working practices, with simple reminders and posters around the kitchen raising awareness of dermatitis and the measures staff can use to protect themselves; and
- encourage employees to raise any concerns and seek medical advice without delay if their skin begins to be irritated.

As with all health and safety at work issues, the key is combining robust risk assessment with ongoing monitoring to ensure that the risks posed by any substances hazardous to health are consistently and effectively managed.

In the next edition, we will consider risks posed to employees by the disposal of waste in the kitchen.

**Look out in future editions for tips on how to manage other key areas of risk which are providers should be aware of.**

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