

SKIN PROTECTION

The skin is the single largest organ of the body. The skin, when healthy, protects us from chemical, physical, and biological hazards. Skin weighs about 10% of our total body weight and is approximately one eighth of an inch thick. The skin is made up of two layers, the epidermis (outer layer) and the dermis (inner layer). The outer layer of skin is only 1/250th of an inch thick, and is the part of our skin that forms the protective barrier.

There are many skin irritants that employees may be exposed to in the workplace. One out of every four workers may be exposed to something that will irritate the skin. Many different things may cause skin damage. When something penetrates through the outer layer, the inner layer of skin reacts to it. Strong or regularly repeated irritations of the skin may lead to skin diseases. The skin contains oil glands, hair follicles, and sweat glands. These are like tiny holes. So the skin can be like a sponge when it contacts something. Skin also contains blood vessels, and some chemicals can penetrate the outer layer and enter the blood stream.

The type of environment you are in can cause skin problems directly or they can work with other factors to increase skin problems. These factors include:

- **Heat** – causes sweating. Sweating may dissolve chemicals and bring them into closer contact with the skin. Heat increases the blood flow at the skin surface and may increase the absorption of substances into the body.
- **Cold** – dries the skin and causes microscopic cracking. This cracking allows substances to cross the outer layer of the skin, thus entering the body.
- **Sun** – burns and damages the skin. Sun can increase absorption of chemicals. Sun reacts with some chemicals to enhance their negative affects on the body.

How to Protect Your Skin

- Wear long sleeve shirts and pants, to minimize the amount of skin exposed.
- When working outdoors, wear a hat with a brim.
- Use a high sun protection factor (SPF) sunscreen.
- Wash your hands regularly during and after work.
- Wear gloves when handling chemicals.
- Where possible, use tools to handle hazardous substances instead of your hands.

When using gloves or clothing to protect yourself and your skin, you should be careful when removing contaminated clothing, so as not to contaminate yourself.

If a worker is exposed, or thinks he/she may have been exposed to a hazardous substance, the area should be rinsed for at least 15 minutes. If a worker is accidentally contaminated, he or she should get under a shower immediately and remove the clothing while showering. Certain substances can be absorbed quickly across the skin. Time is critical. Medical help should be obtained immediately.

