

### Preventing contact dermatitis caused by cumulative exposure to chemicals

Members will, rightly, be washing their hands and using hand sanitiser far more frequently than usual. This is a requirement on us all to keep as safe as possible but the chemicals involved (including soap or detergent and sanitiser) all have a mild irritant effect which is exacerbated by frequent exposure to water and, at this time of year, cold air. While these irritants are mild and, unless they produce an allergic reaction, are not likely to cause a problem it is known that cumulative exposure to mild irritants can cause contact dermatitis. The HSE describe the science of it here <https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/ms24.pdf>

“14 Irritants can be divided, in practice, into those with strong and those with weak irritancy, though there is, in reality, a continuous gradation in strength. Thus, by sufficient dilution, a strong irritant can be converted to a weak one. Strong irritants can provoke visible skin damage, termed **acute irritant contact dermatitis**, or even chemical burns, after just a single exposure; whereas weak irritants require frequent multiple exposures, often over periods as long as months or even years, the result being termed **chronic (or cumulative) irritant contact dermatitis**.”

When we also consider that, in workplaces, members are using chemicals (such as sanitising wipes and disinfectant sprays) far more than usual the cumulative effect increases and with it the risk of contact dermatitis. There is also research to suggest that women in particular are more at risk of the cumulative effect, even when their exposure in the workplace is less frequent, because they are more likely to be exposed to chemicals in the home. Of course this would also apply to men who use chemicals in the home but the research highlights that women in general are more likely to encounter this.

At a time when we are all exposed to potential irritants far more as we remain vigilant about hygiene in the workplace and at home we must take steps to protect ourselves. We have called on employers to recommend the use of disposable gloves when using chemicals (such as sanitising wipes, disinfectant or antiviral sprays or any type of detergent) except of course when washing hands.

We have secured this agreement from NPS and will be working with all other employers to do the same.

**Our advice to members is to use disposable gloves when using any chemicals when using chemicals (such as sanitising wipes, disinfectant or antiviral sprays or any type of detergent) except of course when washing hands.**