

The Skin You're In

Does your work give you dry, irritated skin? Have you ever wondered why? Did you know that this condition not only can affect you, but the health of your family as well?

Recently, I learned that cement residue can follow you all the way home. It can remain on your skin, your clothes, and even the interior of your car, making you the perfect carrier for dermatitis—a silent skin irritant that infiltrates your home and can possibly affect your family members who were never even on the jobsite. This can happen with simple skin-to-skin contact or by washing your work clothes with those of your family. Concrete contractors often accept their skin problems as “just part of the job.” While mild irritation

might seem like an annoyance, it can escalate to a more serious problem involving your immune system.

Skin signs

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “portland cement is estimated to account for 25% or more of all work-related skin problems worldwide.” Exposure to portland cement, as well as other ingredients in concrete, can cause a number of skin conditions—ranging in symptoms from mild to severe. Pain, itching, burning, rash, blisters, dry or dead skin, redness, and swelling are tell-

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tale signs of dermatitis.

Watching your skin for these signs will help determine if you, or anyone in your family, may be suffering from the skin condition.

■ Dry skin or irritation, also known as **mild irritant contact dermatitis (ICD)**, is the least

serious skin condition. Symptoms include irritation, pain, scaling, burning, and redness.

■ ICD results in more acute or chronic symptoms such as swelling, bumps, blisters, stinging, and scabs. Skin also may become infected, requiring additional treatment.

■ Some workers may develop **allergic contact dermatitis** where the

immune system responds to one or more of the ingredients in concrete. Symptoms are similar to ICD, recurring after each exposure, so diagnosis can be difficult. Chemicals, accelerators, superplasticizers, water reducers, air-entraining agents, and retardants all can react with the sensitive and thin layer of skin.

■ The most severe type of dermatitis is chemically caused **caustic burns**. Second and third degree burns are possible with relatively short exposure to concrete, grout, fresh mortar, or other portland cement products.

As with any medical condition, consult a physician for diagnosis and

treatment options.

Get into the habit

With a little daily effort, you can eliminate the threat of dermatitis in your home. Getting into the habit of changing your clothes and washing with pH-neutral soap will greatly minimize the amount of cement residue you bring home. Here are some other recommendations from the CDC.

- Use pH-neutral or acidic soaps.
- Wash work clothes separately.
- Wash hands before putting on gloves and after they are removed.
- Thoroughly dry your hands before putting on gloves.
- Remove wet cement immediately from clothing or skin.
- Wear long sleeves taped inside gloves.
- Don't wear jewelry at work.
- Change work clothes at work, keeping cement residue out of the car and the home.
- Avoid using lanolin, petroleum jelly, and other skin softening products at work, which increase the skin's ability to absorb irritants.
- Use the right kind of glove for the job. Barrier creams, or invisible gloves, are not an alternative and should be avoided.
- Clean and dry your gloves daily or use disposable gloves instead.
- Contact your physician immediately if you experience a persistent skin problem.

More tips can be found in "The Handbook of Skin Protection," available for purchase at www.wocbookstore.com/w-th003.html.

Don't wait until you develop an irritating case of dermatitis—or worse, someone in your family becomes ill. Take care to leave work *at work*, because a skin condition should never be just part of the job.



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