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Protecting the hands of bodyshop workers against chemical threats

Chemicals are literally the driving force of the body shop industry. Look around businesses up and down the country and you will find chemicals in every unit and on every shelf.

Whilst essential, chemicals also present a significant worker hazard and are one of the biggest health and safety challenges for those in the sector. Paints, thinners, grease, oil, degreasers, cleaning fluids and solvents are an example of the types of chemicals used daily in the industry.



According to hand protection experts Marigold Industrial Ltd, unless the right type of protection is given to workers hands, regular contact with workplace chemicals will be storing up trouble for both worker and body shop owner alike.

"Unless it is protected properly, skin that is exposed to chemicals can become irritated, burned or ulcerated. Whether they are strong chemicals, such as degreasers or subtler ones, such as mild cleaning fluids, chemicals will break down the skin's natural defence – it's just a matter of time.

"Sometimes that damage occurs quickly where people are working with stronger chemicals. More often, and this is where most skin injuries take place, damage occurs over a longer period of time as people perceive that the substance they are working with poses little or no chemical threat, is not particularly 'hazardous' or not obviously dangerous," said John Thorne, UK Country Manager for Marigold Industrial Ltd.



"You wouldn't ever consider dipping your hand into a vat of chemicals, yet thousands of people in body shops every day, work with cleaning fluids, oils, paints and greases all of which are chemicals that strip the skin of its natural protective oils," added John.

Dermatitis remains one of the major causes of workplace injury within the body shop sector as it has done for the past decade. According to Marigold Industrial with the vast majority of businesses in the sector classed as small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) with over half the workforce (~58%) employed in either zero-employee enterprises e.g. sole traders or partnerships, or businesses employing less than 10 people, it is perhaps not surprising that the dermatitis injury figure remains high, with the health and safety manager function being one of many that owner operators have to deal with on a daily basis.

"Owners and managers are having to contend with a wealth of issues and responsibilities, one of which is health and safety. Sourcing detailed information on issues such as the provision of the right hand protection for common workplace chemicals can be seen as a time consuming process and not as important or pressing as other business issues.

"Unless the information is easy to source and understand, there is an increased likelihood that gloves that are inappropriate to the substances being handled will be provided in the hope 'a glove must act as a barrier'," said Mr Thorne.

According to Marigold Industrial, the ideal scenario would be to remove any contact between worker and chemical, but as that is impossible, the challenge is to ensure that where skin exposure to chemicals is concerned, the right type of protection is provided.

The company says the first and most important step for those with responsibility for health and safety is to know the chemicals staff are working with and how they are working with them.

Chemical safety data sheets are an essential tool in identifying chemical make up and hazard levels to the unprotected worker. As well as a vital source of information, they must be held by the employer under COSHH.

Once the make up of a chemical has been understood, Marigold Industrial says safety managers must consider the work being undertaken by staff and the type of contact they have with it and then determine which glove material will provide the right levels of protection.

When determining which glove material will provide the right levels of protection, Marigold Industrial says working with leading glove manufacturers is essential with materials such as Chemical Permeation Charts providing invaluable information.

"Chemical protection has to be based on accurate and authoritative data. Without this, the glove selection process is potentially and seriously flawed, which is why information tools such as our Chemical Permeation Chart are essential.

"The new chart effectively spells out clearly and simply not only how long you can safely use gloves with a particular chemical but which gloves provide the highest levels of protection," said John.

"Statistics show that dermatitis is consistently one of the main causes of workplace injury yet it is one of the most easily preventable if only a little time is taken in understanding the chemicals being used and identifying the materials that provide the right protection.



To help this process, Marigold Industrial's chemical permeation chart adopts a number rating from 0 to 6 to highlight specific glove permeation performance against 100 of the most common workplace chemicals. A glove with a score of 6 provides permeation protection of over 8 hours whilst a glove with a score of 0 provides protection of less than 10 minutes and therefore may be inappropriate for use with a particular chemical. Users can also cross-reference official chemical names with their common alternative names.

Conclusion

Chemicals are one of the main UK workplace hazards, yet one of the most widely used substances. Only by investing time and using all the information available can the right hand protection solution be selected.