

SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

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CLINIC FINDS CAUSES OF WORK-RELATED SKIN PROBLEMS

DALLAS — August 19, 1994 — Since skin problems account for nearly one-third of all health-related workplace complaints, quickly finding the exact causes of these problems helps avoid missed workdays and expensive workers' compensation claims. The Contact Dermatitis Dermatology Clinic at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas is the only referral center in the state specially equipped to do extensive industry-related skin testing.

The clinic in the James W. Aston Ambulatory Care Center, a UT Southwestern outpatient facility, deals with a disorder known as contact dermatitis, a rash that develops when skin is exposed to chemicals. Dr. Ponciano Cruz Jr., an associate professor of dermatology who heads the clinic, said there are two kinds of contact dermatitis: those caused by irritants, which in the right concentration would bother anyone, and those caused by allergens, which affect only certain people.

After examining patients and discussing their workplaces and medical histories, Cruz pinpoints the exact chemical causing the problem through a skin patch test. "We apply the chemicals or would-be allergens on the patient's back, then we read the results after 48 hours and then again after 72 hours," he said. "There's a delay of hours to days before a contact allergic reaction can take place."

The reaction time helps doctors determine if the dermatitis is caused by an irritant or an allergen. An irritant causes a more immediate reaction, while an allergen is more likely to cause a delayed reaction.

Irritants, such as chemicals containing strong acids or bases as well as some greases and oils, are the more common cause of contact dermatitis. If many people from the same workplace are having skin problems, an irritant is usually

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the culprit.

Among allergens, one of the most common is nickel. "Anything that looks like silver or gold that's not 24-karat gold will probably have some nickel in it," Cruz said. That's the reason many people develop rashes when they wear costume jewelry. People also may get reactions from handling keys or coins.

Other common allergens are the components of rubber. Latex causes allergies, as do many of the additives used in manufacturing rubber. "We see a lot of glove dermatitis here at the medical center," Cruz said.

Pinpointing the specific chemical within rubber that causes the reaction is important so that other products containing that chemical can be avoided. One example is the chemical thiuram, which is a rubber additive and is also a component in some insecticides used on golf courses.

Workers in the floral industry may have skin problems caused by allergies to petals, stems and leaves of the plants they work with. The most common of these is a frequently used, inexpensive lily called alstroemeria. Tulips also cause allergic reactions in some people.

By identifying the exact chemicals that are causing contact dermatitis, Cruz can determine whether or not the complaint is work-related. The worker then could be reassigned within the workplace to a job not involving that chemical or issued protective gear. If those options aren't possible, the worker may have to change jobs.

Cruz said his clinic has benefits for both employer and employee. "It's possible that a patient may come in — and it has happened — masquerading with a work-related complaint when, in fact, it isn't," he said. He recalled a man who complained of a work-related problem, which turned out to be a reaction to his cologne. This finding saved the company money in workers' compensation claims.

Discovering the cause of contact dermatitis can help the worker avoid certain chemicals and make their jobs more enjoyable. "Contact dermatitis is a frequent cause of lost workdays because patients, especially if it's truly work

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related, will try to avoid work because they associate the rash with work," Cruz said.

Although most dermatologists should be able to diagnose and treat contact dermatitis, only the more specialized centers can make an accurate determination of the chemical or chemicals that cause the problem.

"There are thousands to millions of chemicals one could test against," Cruz said. "It's not practical for a single dermatologist to keep that in stock for testing. In our center we see a lot of these cases, so it makes economic sense to stock our clinic with those allergens." Without the full array of testing chemicals, doctors have to make educated guesses based on results from tests with a few common chemicals.

Cruz said he still faces some reluctance from employers who don't want to pay for the patch tests unless the results prove that problems are work related. "One reason we're doing the patch test is to find out if it is work related, so it's a Catch-22," he said.

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