Skin Protection An Athlete’s Guide



What do marathon runners and healthcare workers have in common? How about football players and truck drivers? **Hint:** It has to do with something we observe in November. And it’s not Thanksgiving.

Give up? November is National Healthy Skin Month in the United States. To help you bring home the “fluffy” topic of skin care to your workers, this article offers an athlete’s approach.

Skin Health & Athletic Performance

Everybody knows that athletes must be in tip top physical health to succeed. But there’s more to it than just bones and muscles. Skin health is also an important factor in athletic performance. We’ve all heard about strains, tears, sprains and fractures. But what about allergic reactions to earplugs or goggles? Or skin problems like acne mechanica and fungal infections from skin-to-skin contact? Yes, these things do happen. And while they don’t get as much attention as other forms of injury, these topical problems can be just as damaging to an athlete’s career.

What it means is that even the best conditioned athletes need to baby their skin. And what’s true of athletes applies equally to your own workers. No matter what industry you’re in, you should teach your workers about the need to care for their skin and help them do so by emulating the lessons of the athlete’s skin care regimen. Here are three common skin ailments that can harm the athlete and the worker and how to guard against them.

1. **Blisters**

Blisters can trip-up the most dedicated of marathon runners or slam dunk the most agile of basketball players. They’re a problem in the workplace, too. Although not officially considered an occupational injury, some surveys suggest that two-thirds of workers have foot problems. And anything that causes discomfort is bound to make a worker less alert and thus more prone to accident.

Causes:

- Heat
- Moisture
- Shoes that don’t fit

- Movement that creates friction on the skin

Athlete's Tips:

- Lubricate feet, hands and other blister-prone areas with petroleum jelly and lotions
- Keep feet, hands, etc. dry and cool with antiperspirants and drying powders
- Decrease friction by wearing shoes that fit, clean moisture-absorbing synthetic socks and socks that fit.

2. **Acne Mechanica**

Skin that is exposed to heat or that experiences constant friction or pressure may develop acne mechanica, a form of acne. Football players may develop acne mechanica from their shoulder pads; truck drivers may develop it in their backs.

Causes:
Acne mechanica may develop on skin covered by:

- Helmets
- Tight uniforms
- Headbands
- Belts or straps
- Face masks

Athlete's Tips:

- Wear moisture-absorbing clothing beneath gear
- Shower immediately after removing gear

3. **Allergic Contact Dermatitis**

A condition officially known as allergic contact dermatitis afflicts athletes and workers in many industries. It's marked by red, itchy blister patches on the skin produced as the result of contact with an allergenic substance. Over time, the substance wears down the skin's protective outer layer, making its way to the natural skin proteins. When the immune system responds, it releases a chemical that causes itching, pain, redness, swelling and blisters. Some swimmers experience contact dermatitis in reaction to the rubber components of earplugs, bathing caps or goggles. It's also fairly common among coal miners, agriculture workers and healthcare workers.

Causes:

- Hot workplaces
- Dry air
- Friction on the skin
- Substances such as acids, alkalis, mineral oils, solvents, bleaches, glues, pollen, wood dusts, nickel, some types of vegetables and fruits and even antibiotics

Athlete's Tips:

- Avoid contact with the allergen (determined by a patch test)
- Apply ice or soak it in cold water
- Apply anti-itch lotion or spray

- Keep affected area clean, but avoid harsh soaps and detergents and harsh scrubbers, such as pumice, that may dry out the skin
- Dry skin completely with clean paper towels or hot air dryers and replenish your skin’s oils with a good hand cream
- Change into clean clothes at the end of the workout – or work

Conclusion

Smart athletes understand the health risks of their sport and the protections and procedures necessary to guard against it. This includes not just injury to bone and muscle but also skin. Your workers would do well to take a page out of the athlete’s book. And you should help them do so.

First you need to educate workers about the importance of skin protection. Then you need to make them aware of the various things they can do to protect themselves such as reading the material safety data sheets for products they handle and by wearing appropriate gloves, aprons, footwear, leggings, face shields and coveralls when working with irritants. Last but not least, you need to teach them to recognize and immediately any signs of skin irritation.