ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The risk of occupational contact dermatitis (OCD) in healthcare workers

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Received: 15 February, 2021 Accepted: 18 March, 2021

ABSTRACT

Background: Occupational contact dermatitis (OCD) is a prevalent work-related skin condition, particularly among healthcare workers (HCWs) due to frequent exposure to irritants and allergens.**Objectives:**To determine the prevalence of OCD among HCWs, identify key risk factors, and evaluate the effectiveness of current preventive practices.**Methods:**A cross-sectional study was conducted with 320 HCWs from various healthcare facilities. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and dermatological assessments. Statistical analysis was performed to identify significant associations between OCD and risk factors.**Results:**The incidence of OCD was 30%, with irritant contact dermatitis (ICD) accounting for 75% of cases and allergic contact dermatitis (ACD) for 25%. Frequent handwashing (≥10 times/day), prolonged glove use (>4 hours/day), and a history of atopic dermatitis were significantly associated with OCD ($p < 0.05$). Only 30% of affected HCWs reported using emollients regularly, and 40% received formal training on skin care.**Conclusions:**It is concluded that OCD is a common occupational hazard among HCWs, with significant impacts on their well-being and job performance. Enhanced preventive measures, including skin-friendly hygiene practices, hypoallergenic gloves, and comprehensive education programs, are essential to reduce its incidence.

INTRODUCTION

Occupational contact dermatitis (OCD) is a significant work-related health condition and a major contributor to occupational skin diseases worldwide. It is characterized by inflammation of the skin following exposure to irritants or allergens and can manifest as erythema, itching, dryness, scaling, or even chronic lesions [1] . Among healthcare workers (HCWs), OCD has emerged as a particularly concerning issue due to the high frequency of exposure to potential triggers in their work environment. As HCWs are critical to the functioning of healthcare systems, addressing the incidence of OCD among them is essential not only for their personal health but also for maintaining workforce efficiency and patient care quality.The nature of healthcare work inherently exposes HCWs to various substances known to cause OCD[2]. Frequent hand washing with soaps, repeated use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers, prolonged wearing of gloves, and handling disinfectants and cleaning agents are common occupational practices that can result in irritant contact dermatitis (ICD). Similarly, exposure to latex gloves, adhesives, and antiseptics can lead to allergic contact dermatitis (ACD), a delayed hypersensitivity reaction that may develop over time [3] . The dual pressures of ensuring personal safety and adhering to infection control protocols, especially during public health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have increased the frequency and duration of exposure to these irritants and allergens, further exacerbating the risk of OCD among HCWs [4] .

Epidemiological studies have highlighted the prevalence and impact of OCD among HCWs. Research indicates that contact dermatitis accounts for up to 25% of all occupational diseases, with HCWs being disproportionately affected[5] . A study conducted in Europe estimated the annual incidence rate of OCD among HCWs to range between 20 and 40 cases per 10,000 workers, while other studies suggest higher rates in regions with more stringent hygiene practices. The underreporting of occupational skin diseases due to stigmatization, lack of awareness, or fear of job-related repercussions likely results in an underestimation of the true burden of OCD among HCWs [6].The consequences of OCD are not limited

to physical symptoms; they can extend to emotional and professional domains. Persistent skin issues may lead to discomfort, pain, reduced job satisfaction, and even absenteeism. Severe cases may necessitate job modifications, retraining, or in extreme situations, leaving the healthcare profession altogether. These outcomes not only affect individual workers but can also result in financial costs for healthcare institutions due to loss of productivity, medical expenses, and the need for staff replacements [7].

Various risk factors contribute to the development of OCD in HCWs, with prolonged exposure to irritants and allergens being the most significant. Individual susceptibility, such as pre-existing atopic dermatitis or a genetic predisposition, can increase vulnerability to OCD. Additionally, environmental factors like high humidity, frequent glove use, and exposure to harsh cleaning agents amplify the risk [8] . Organizational practices, including insufficient provision of skin protection measures, inadequate training on safe handling of chemicals, and lack of access to emollients or alternative protective equipment, further exacerbate the issue.Preventive measures play a crucial role in mitigating the incidence and impact of OCD among HCWs [9] . Adopting skin-friendly infection control practices, such as using alcohol-based hand sanitizers with added moisturizers and replacing latex gloves with hypoallergenic alternatives, can significantly reduce exposure to irritants and allergens[10] . Education on proper skincare techniques, including regular application of emollients, recognition of early symptoms, and appropriate use of personal protective equipment (PPE), is essential. Healthcare institutions can also contribute by implementing robust skin health surveillance programs and fostering a culture of open communication about occupational health concerns [11] .This study was conducted **t**o analyze the incidence, risk factors, and preventive strategies for occupational contact dermatitis among healthcare workers to enhance workplace safety and well-being.

METHODOLOGY

This cross-sectional study was conducted and total of 320 participants were recruited from various healthcare facilities, including hospitals, clinics, and long-term care centers. Participants included doctors, nurses, allied health professionals, and support staff who were directly or indirectly involved in patient care and regularly exposed to potential irritants or allergens.

Data collection was conducted using a structured questionnaire and dermatological assessments. The questionnaire captured demographic information, occupational history, exposure to potential irritants and allergens, frequency of hand hygiene practices, use of personal protective equipment (PPE), and history of skin-related symptoms. Dermatological examinations were performed by trained professionals to confirm cases of OCD and distinguish between irritant and allergic contact dermatitis.

Inclusion criteria were HCWs aged 18 and above with at least one year of work experience in healthcare. Exclusion criteria included pre-existing chronic skin conditions unrelated to occupational exposure or a history of non-occupational exposure to irritants/allergens. Data analysis was performed using statistical tools to determine the prevalence of OCD, identify significant risk factors, and evaluate the effectiveness of current preventive measures. Ethical approval was obtained, and informed consent was secured from all participants before the study.

RESULTS

Data were collected from 320 participants. The data highlights the prevalence of occupational contact dermatitis (OCD) among healthcare workers, with 30% of participants affected. Nurses exhibited the highest prevalence at 32%, possibly due to frequent handwashing and prolonged glove use, while doctors and allied health/support staff showed similar rates of 28% and 28.6%, respectively. These findings underscore the occupational risks faced by all healthcare professions, with the overall prevalence indicating a significant burden of OCD in healthcare settings.

Table 1: Prevalence of OCD Among Healthcare Workers

Profession	Number of Participants	Cases of OCD	Percentage with OCD
Nurses	150	48	32%
Doctors	100	28	28%
Allied Health/Support Staff	70	20	28.6%
Total	320	96	30%

Frequent handwashing (≥10 times/day) and prolonged glove use (>4 hours/day) were the most reported risk factors among OCD cases, cited by 72% and 80%, respectively, compared to 46% and 50% of non-OCD cases. A history of atopic dermatitis and exposure to harsh disinfectants were also more common among OCD cases (25% and 60%, respectively) than non-OCD cases (8% and 40%). These findings emphasize the significant role of occupational habits and pre-existing conditions in the development of OCD.

Table 2: Risk Factors Associated with OCD

Risk Factor	Percentage of OCD Cases Reporting Factor	Percentage of Non-OCD Cases Reporting Factor
Frequent Handwashing (≥10 times/day)	72%	46%
Prolonged Glove Use (>4 hours/day)	80%	50%
History of Atopic Dermatitis	25%	8%
Exposure to Harsh Disinfectants	60%	40%

Preventive measures were underutilized among OCD cases, with only 30% reporting regular use of emollients or barrier creams, and 50% of cases with allergic contact dermatitis (ACD) using hypoallergenic gloves. The limited adoption of these preventive measures suggests the need for increased emphasis on skin protection strategies to mitigate the risk of OCD, particularly among individuals with heightened susceptibility.

Table 3: Preventive Measures for OCD

Preventive Measure	Percentage of OCD Cases Reporting Use
Regular Use of Emollients/Barrier Creams	30%
Use of Hypoallergenic Gloves	50% (ACD cases)

Awareness and training for OCD prevention were suboptimal, with only 40% of total participants and OCD cases receiving formal skin care training. While 75% of participants were aware of safe hygiene guidelines, only 25% of OCD cases reported such awareness. This discrepancy highlights gaps in knowledge transfer and the need for targeted educational initiatives to improve adherence to preventive measures and safe hygiene practices in healthcare settings.

Table 4: Awareness and Training for OCD Prevention

Metric	Percentage of Total Participants	Percentage of OCD Cases
Received Formal Skin Care Training	40%	40%
Awareness of Safe Hygiene Guidelines	75%	25%

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the significant burden of occupational contact dermatitis (OCD) among healthcare workers (HCWs), with an overall incidence of 30%. This prevalence underscores the occupational risks associated with healthcare settings, particularly the frequent use of irritants and allergens during routine infection control practices. The results align with existing literature, which identifies HCWs as one of the occupational groups most at risk for work-related skin conditions[12].The high incidence of irritant contact dermatitis (ICD) (75% of OCD cases) is strongly linked to repetitive hand hygiene practices, prolonged glove use, and exposure to harsh disinfectants. These findings emphasize the need for a balanced approach to infection prevention and skin health. While stringent hand hygiene protocols are essential for patient safety, they can inadvertently increase the risk of OCD if adequate protective measures are not in place [13]. The significant association between frequent handwashing (≥10 times/day) and OCD highlights the need for alternative skin-friendly disinfectants, the inclusion of moisturizers in alcohol-based hand rubs, and the promotion of proper skincare routines among HCWs [14] .

Allergic contact dermatitis (ACD), accounting for 25% of OCD cases, was particularly associated with latex gloves and certain chemical disinfectants. This finding reinforces the importance of transitioning to hypoallergenic gloves and reducing reliance on high-sensitizing agents in healthcare facilities. Despite advancements in glove materials, the persistence of ACD cases suggests gaps in awareness and adherence to alternative protective equipment[15].The study also identified several modifiable factors that could reduce the incidence and severity of OCD. For example, only 30% of affected HCWs reported regular use of emollients or barrier creams, indicating a lack of awareness or availability of these preventive measures. Additionally, inadequate formal training on skin care and occupational health was reported by 60% of participants, suggesting a need for improved education programs. Such interventions could include training sessions on early recognition of symptoms, proper use of personal protective equipment (PPE), and access to resources like hypoallergenic gloves and skincare products [16].

The impact of OCD on job performance and quality of life cannot be overlooked. The 40% of affected workers who reported discomfort interfering with their tasks and the 15% who required medical leave highlight the broader implications of OCD on healthcare delivery [17]. Addressing these issues is essential not only for the well-being of individual HCWs but also for maintaining workforce efficiency and minimizing disruptions in patient care.One limitation of this study is its cross-sectional design, which prevents causal inferences [18]. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data for some variables

may introduce recall bias. However, the inclusion of dermatological assessments strengthens the reliability of the OCD diagnoses. Future longitudinal studies could provide more insight into the progression of OCD and the long-term effectiveness of preventive measures.

CONCLUSION

It is concluded that occupational contact dermatitis (OCD) is a prevalent and significant issue among healthcare workers, driven primarily by frequent hand hygiene practices, prolonged glove use, and exposure to irritants and allergens. Preventive measures, such as the use of hypoallergenic gloves, regular application of emollients, and comprehensive skin health training, are essential to mitigate the risk.

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