



RASHES FROM YOUR COMPUTER

With computers now such an important part of our lives, it's not surprising that there are a number of health conditions associated with working at a computer. This includes back, neck and arm pain, occupational overuse syndrome, etc. Computer users also complain of visual problems or headaches.

A somewhat lesser known health risk associated with computers is getting a rash from typing on a computer.

Dermatitis from chemical contact

Contact dermatitis is a rash caused by touching the computer, mouse, mouse pad, wrist rest or other surfaces that contain particular chemicals.

Some people have been found to react negatively to dimethyl phalate and diethyl phalate, additives which are commonly found in the plastics computer mice are made of. Phalates are added to plastics to make them flexible.

Resorcinol monobenzoate, a stabilising ultraviolet absorber added to protect plastics from sun damage, is an irritant for some computer users.

Neoprene rubber is another common culprit. This can be usually found on the mouse pad and wrist rest pads. Contact dermatitis can also be caused by dialkyl thiourea.

Whatever its cause, contact dermatitis presents as a rash on the part of the skin that regularly touches the chemical that causes the problem. Looking at where the rash occurs can help identify its cause.

Erythema ab igne

In the past, this condition was typically found when someone habitually kept a hot water bottle against a specific body part, or exposed part of their body to heat repeatedly, for instance with their feet near the heater. It is commonly called "toasted skin syndrome".

Nowadays doctors often encounter this reaction on people's thighs when they rest their laptop computer on their legs for too long – hence the new name "laptop leg".

Rashes from friction

These rashes are caused by the way in which a particular person uses the computer and mouse. Some people may develop a thickened, perhaps slightly pigmented rash where their arm or hand rubs against the keyboard, the mouse pad or even the edge of the desk. This is often not painful at all.

When it affects the fingers, the rash has been called "mouse fingers". This typically arises by the repeated friction and pressure between the fingers and the mouse or mouse pad.

Screen dermatitis

Chronic exposure to the computer screen can cause some people to develop a rash on their face that can look a bit like rosacea. It can include an itchy or hot feeling, bumps, redness or even pustules.

The exact cause of "screen dermatitis" is still not clear and is still being investigated. There does seem to be a possible link to the kind of skin damage that occurs due to ultraviolet light and ionising radiation such as x-rays.

Medical attention for computer rashes

With awareness of the possibility that your computer can cause rashes on your skin, you'll be better placed to know when to seek medical attention. When you consult a doctor, do let them know how often and for how long you have been using a computer and alert them to the possibility that the rash may be related to the computer.

This article is partly based on one by Dr A.C. Huntley, published in Dermatology Online Journal 2010;16(12):3