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New skin disorder caused by mobile phones discovered

For immediate release, Thursday October 16th 2008

Doctors are being warned to be alert to a new allergic skin disorder, caused by mobile phones, according to the British Association of Dermatologists.

A new phenomenon called "mobile phone dermatitis" has been discovered, in which people who spend long periods of time on their mobile phone develop an allergic reaction to the phone's nickel surface.

The problem was identified in several published case reports of patients with unexplained rashes on their face and ear. Closer investigation revealed that the reaction was caused by nickel in the mobile phone handsets, where it is often found in the casing or buttons, particularly in the most fashionable models.

Now the British Association of Dermatologists is warning other doctors to be aware of the allergy, which is thought to be on the increase. Because the condition has only newly been identified, many cases may go unreported or untreated, which has prompted the scientists to share their findings.

Nickel allergy is the most common contact allergy in the UK and is thought to affect 30 percent of the population, with a rising incidence.* Women have a higher risk of developing mobile phone dermatitis, as they are more likely to have been previously sensitised to the metal following an allergic reaction to nickel-coated jewellery.

Dr Graham Lowe, from the British Association of Dermatologists, said: "The allergy results from frequent skin contact with nickel-containing objects. Prolonged or repetitive contact with a nickel-containing phone is more likely to cause a skin reaction in those who are allergic. If you have had a previous reaction to a nickel-coated belt-buckle or jewellery, for example, you are at greater risk of reacting to metal phones.

"In mobile phone dermatitis, the rash would typically occur on the cheek or ear, depending on where the metal part of the phone comes into contact with the skin. In theory it could even occur on the fingers if you spend a lot of time texting on metal menu buttons.

"It is worth doctors bearing this condition in mind if they see a patient with a rash on the cheek or ear that cannot otherwise be explained."

In a study published earlier this year, doctors in the US tested for nickel in 22 popular handsets from eight different manufacturers, and found it present in ten of them.¹

Dr Lionel Bercovitch, one of the study's authors from Brown University, Rhode Island, said: "Nearly half of the phones we spot tested contained some free nickel. The menu buttons, decorative logos on the headsets and the metallic frames around the liquid crystal display (LCD) screens were the most common sites... Those with the more fashionable designs often have metallic accents and are more likely to contain free nickel in their casings.

"Given the widespread use of cell phones, the presence of metal in the exterior casing of these phones and the high prevalence of nickel sensitization in the population, it is not surprising that cell phones can cause allergic contact dermatitis."

Several other cases have been reported, prompting the British Association of Dermatologists to share the research with other doctors. The association is advising anyone who develops a rash on their face which might be attributable to prolonged mobile phone use to seek advice from their doctor.

-ends-

Note to editors:

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* "Genetic Factors in Nickel Allergy"; Journal of Investigative Dermatology (2004) 123, xxiv-xxv, doi:10.1111/j.0022-202X.2004.23508.x; Veronique Bataille, Genetic Epidemiology and Twin Research Unit, St Thomas Hospital, London, UK

Recent case reports of mobile phone dermatitis:

¹ "Cellphone contact dermatitis with nickel allergy"; Lionel Bercovitch, MD* and John Luo; *Department of Dermatology, Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University; Liberal Medical Education, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, USA.

CMAJ, January 1, 2008; 178 (1). doi:10.1503/cmaj.071233. <http://www.cmaj.ca/cgi/content/full/178/1/23>

"Mobile phone dermatitis: a modern presentation of contact allergy"; A. Waters, C.M. Green and S. Lewis-Jones; Ninewells Hospital, Dundee, UK.

Overview available in British Journal of Dermatology, BSPD abstracts 2008; Presented at British Society for Paediatric Dermatology Annual Symposium, November 2007.

"Cellular phone addiction and allergic contact dermatitis to nickel"; Contact Dermatitis

Volume 57 Issue 2, Pages 130 – 131; Cristina Livideanu 1, Francoise Giordano-Labadie 1 Carle Paul 1; 1 University Paul-Sabatier, Department of Dermatology, Purpan University Hospital, Place du Dr Baylac Toulouse, France; 11 Jul 2007;

<http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/117986581/abstract>

"Mobile telephone as new source for nickel dermatitis"; Contact Dermatitis

Volume 56 Issue 2, Pages 113 – 113; Stefan Wöhr 1, Tamara Jandl 1, Georg Stingl 1 Tamar Kinaciyan 1; 1 Department of Dermatology, Division of Immunology, Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Medical University of Vienna; 18 Jan 2007

<http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/117986455/abstract?CRETRY=1&SRETRY=0>

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