

Employers, don't underestimate your responsibility

Home washing can affect your employees' safety, as well as your liability



High-visibility workwear. Picture courtesy of Berendsen ©

According to EU legislation, employers are legally responsible for the health and safety of their employees. Amongst other duties, they have to provide their employees with protective workwear and other personal protective equipment (PPE) that complies with European laws and European and international standards. But, their legal responsibility doesn't end there. In fact, employers have to make sure these standards are respected throughout the lifetime of the workwear. However, reality shows that in many companies, employees are entrusted with the care and maintenance of their own workwear. This practice is not without risk. The results of a GfK survey into consumers' behaviour when washing workwear at home, show that these home washing habits can affect the workwear's protective properties and jeopardize the safety of the wearer.

Workwear should not be washed at home because:

1. Home washing offers **no reassurance** that all stains and soils are adequately removed without compromising the protective properties;
2. Home washing habits **may partially or completely reduce** the effectiveness of the workwear's protective qualities, hence jeopardizing the wearer's safety;

3. Workwear washed at home is **not inspected and retreated** as it is in an industrial laundry;
4. Home washing does **not track** the number of washes or the wear and tear of the garment, which provides vital information as to when workwear must be replaced.

Washing workwear at home puts employee safety at risk

According to the survey results, on average 80% of respondents (in the UK even a staggering 92%) indicate they take care of all workwear laundering at home, while only 9% say workwear laundering is provided by the employer. These figures indicate that employers appear to rely too easily on their employees for the care and maintenance of the workwear. However, by doing so, they risk losing control of their duty to care.

The survey shows that employees' home washing habits involve many risks as to the protective properties of their workwear. These properties include electrostatic ability, fire-retardancy, high visibility and chemical repellence.

- Home washing focuses on a clean appearance. 93% of all respondents consider their workwear to be clean once it is washed. But a visually clean result may be superficially clean, while leaving residues of hazardous materials which may affect the protective qualities. For example, if a mineral oil stain is not adequately removed, the remaining oil traces can affect the fire-retardant properties of the garment.
- When worn in certain working environments, protective workwear can contain hazardous substances. If not washed separately, these substances can contaminate personal laundry items. Nevertheless, 58% of survey respondents do not consistently wash their workwear and personal laundry separately and only 48% always sort their soiled workwear from their personal laundry.
- When washed at an inappropriate temperature, the workwear's protective properties can become less effective or may even be eliminated. At home, consumers seem to favour low temperature washing, often recommended by domestic machine and detergent manufacturers.
- 68% of respondents use washing softeners and 58% use stain removers. These domestic products can seriously damage the protective properties of workwear, such as flame-retardancy or antistatic abilities. Furthermore, these domestic products are not as effective as professional detergents for industrial soiling.
- Although half of the respondents say their workwear is replaced when damaged, 4 out of 10 survey participants repair their workwear themselves, which can undermine its effectiveness.
- According to 47% of all respondents, employers only check the state of their workwear from 'time to time'. Furthermore, this inspection, either performed by the employer or the employee, mainly covers visual workwear damage, often resulting in a premature replacement.
- Workwear with chemical repellent properties, for example, needs to be retreated regularly, as the number of washes reduces its protective properties. It is therefore important to keep a detailed record on the item's maintenance history. At home, consumers cannot provide such crucial information, nor do they have the appropriate technology to retreat garments.

*Source: figures are based on results of the GfK survey**

The above shows that washing workwear at home can reduce the effectiveness of the workwear's protective properties and does not offer any information as to when the workwear needs to be replaced.

Relying on employees' washing habits can be a risky business for employers

Employers need to be aware that the care and maintenance of protective workwear is a complex requirement that goes far beyond a clean appearance. Home washing leaves the door open to workwear not protecting the wearer when necessary. The responsibility for this risk lies with the employer. An alternative exists, which will remove the risk and uncertainties and provide the reassurance required.

Industrial laundering = control + effective protection

When workwear is laundered by a textile services company, employers can be assured that all the necessary parameters are taken into account to make sure that the workwear will offer the required protection. These parameters include temperature, choice of detergents and dosage, mechanical action, nature of stains and type of fabric.

- Textile service companies adhere to strict European and international standards;
- They use high-quality technology and sophisticated processes throughout the entire laundering cycle (sorting, washing, drying and transportation) to avoid rapid deterioration of the protective properties of the garments.
- Industrial laundries have the technology and the skills for the required inspection, repair, retreatment and checking of workwear's protective properties.
- Textile rental firms use radio frequency identification (RFID) chips, barcodes and other specialized IT-technologies to keep detailed records on the maintenance history of each garment.

Industrial laundering is a safer alternative

Industrial laundering provided by a textile service company is a safer alternative for protective workwear than home washing. It ensures that protective garments continue to protect the wearer every time they are worn. And it provides employers with peace of mind that there is no risk to their employees' safety due to inappropriate care of their workwear.

*GfK survey on "Consumer behaviour while washing workwear at home"

The GfK survey "Consumer behaviour while washing workwear at home" commissioned by the European Textile Services Association (ETSA), was conducted between July and November 2012 in Belgium, Germany, Poland and the UK. In each country approximately 400 respondents were interviewed via an online survey and face-to-face interviews. The respondents came from the following industries and sectors: construction, public services, healthcare and medical, engineering, food and beverages,

retail/supermarkets, agriculture/horticulture, chemical/petrochemical, road works and fisheries. The full study results are available on the ETSA website www.textile-services.eu .