

Washing workwear at home puts employee safety at risk

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

Brussels, 5 November 2014 - Washing workwear at home can partially or completely reduce the effectiveness of workwear's protective properties, which include electrostatic ability, fire-retardancy, high visibility and chemical repellence, and can therefore jeopardize the safety of the wearer. This is one of the conclusions of a GfK survey (*) into consumers' behaviour when washing workwear at home.

The survey shows that on average 80% of respondents – in the UK even a staggering 92% - indicate they take care of all workwear laundering at home. According to these figures, employers appear to rely too easily on their employees for the care and maintenance of the workwear. According to European legislation, employers are legally responsible for the occupational health and safety of their employees. Yet, they don't seem to be fully aware of the risks they take in terms of their liability by relying on employees' home washing habits.

Home washing undermines workwear's protective properties

A closer look at the facts and figures in the survey shows that:

- 93% of all respondents consider their workwear to be clean once it is washed. But a visually clean result may only be superficially clean, leaving residue of hazardous materials which may affect the protective qualities;
- Although protective workwear can contain hazardous substances, 58% do not consistently wash their workwear and personal laundry separately, which may lead to contamination;
- At home, consumers seem to favour low temperature washing, often recommended by domestic machine and detergent manufacturers. However, when washed at an inappropriate temperature, the workwear's protective properties can become less effective or may even be eliminated;
- 68% of respondents use washing softeners and 58% use stain removers. These domestic products can not only seriously damage the protective properties of workwear, such as flame-retardancy or antistatic abilities, but are less effective than the professional products used by industrial laundries;
- 40% of 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”. However, this inspection, either performed by the employer or the employee, mainly covers visual workwear damage, often resulting in a premature replacement;
- Although the number of washes can reduce the protective properties of workwear (e.g. chemical repellent garments need to be retreated regularly), consumers don’t keep track of the maintenance history of each garment – as opposed to industrial laundering firms – nor do they have the appropriate technology to retreat the garments;

Employers need to stay in control of their duty to care

Beyond the safety of the wearer, workwear that is not entirely hygienic and worn in the food industry, for example, may contaminate the food, with serious health and safety consequences for consumers. A similar risk exists in the healthcare sector, where an employee wearing contaminated workwear poses a high risk in a hygienic environment. And although many bacteria abound in public transport, 50% of those surveyed wear their workwear travelling to and from the workplace.

The survey conclusions show how employees’ home washing habits can affect the safety of workwear, and the safety of the environment in which that workwear is worn. There is no doubt as to their good intentions, but many employees probably don’t realise that washing workwear at home can seriously jeopardize their own occupational safety. Employers need to be aware that relying on their employees for the care and maintenance of workwear does not offer them any reassurance that the workwear will provide them or their work environment the necessary protection.

In some cases, home washing is a viable option, provided that the employer’s decision to allow it is based on a proper risk assessment. More often than not, this is not the case. Employers need to fully understand the impact home washing can have on both their employees’ occupational safety and their own liability. They also need to be aware that a much safer option is provided by professional textile service firms. They ensure that protective garments continue to protect the wearer every time they are worn. And they provide employers with peace of mind that there is no risk to their employees’ safety due to inappropriate care of their workwear.

More details on the safer alternative provided by textiles service firms for the maintenance of workwear is available on www.textile-services.eu.

***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 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 .

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