

DO A PATCH TEST: *you could save a life*

Your insurance is invalid without a patch test – yet BABTAC’s random survey of therapists found that many were prepared to book a treatment without carrying one out.



BABTAC has been in the news this year after research it commissioned found that nearly three-quarters of therapists failed to advise potential clients that a patch test was necessary before carrying out certain treatments.

The research was carried out as part of BABTAC’s ‘qualified, verified, insured’ consumer campaign and involved a potential first-time client attempting to book a procedure that requires a patch test. The calls were made to randomly selected salons and mobile therapists across the UK, the majority of which were not BABTAC members. The treatments requested including spray tanning, brow tints and full head dye.

In total, 71% of therapists surveyed were prepared to make a booking without insisting on a patch test. BABTAC members scored better with 50% insisting that a patch test must be done before a treatment could be carried out.

Even though BABTAC members were better than the industry norm, insurers Balens were concerned by the results.

Claims manager Liza Lambert says: ‘Unfortunately we still see a large number of claims where the therapist has not performed a patch test 24 hours in advance for a treatment where it is a requirement. It is a condition of the insurance policy and if breached will invalidate cover, leaving the therapist having to pay their own costs and expenses. They understandably find this very distressing.’

Why is a patch test so important?

Why do therapists take the risk of skipping a patch test? Is it over-confidence: the belief that things only go wrong for other people? Or is it that the client says they have no allergies to products so it doesn’t seem necessary?

The problem is that allergies are not fully understood – although it’s long been known that an allergy is the body’s reaction to something it thinks is a threat or infection, the reasons why people can suddenly develop allergies are not clearly understood.

In addition, it’s only relatively recently that the phenomenon of cross-allergies has been explored. The most documented example is birch pollen allergy and apple, but other examples include latex and food; and paraphenylenediamine (PPD), often found in darker hair dyes, with para-amino benzoic acid – a preservative used in sunscreens and other lotions – or benzocaine, a local anaesthetic.

Cross allergies occur when the immune system fails to differentiate between protein structures and attacks anything that is similar to the allergen. As a result, new cross-allergens are being discovered all the time.

Generally, allergic reactions are unpleasant but not life threatening, but there are exceptions: anaphylaxis, which can restrict the airways, affect heart rhythm and cause blood pressure to drop, is the best known.

Julie McCabe was 42 when she died from anaphylaxis after colouring her hair. Trichologist Brian Plunkett, founder of TrichoCare Education, was brought in to provide expert advice to Julie’s mother and sisters during the three-day inquest into her death.

Brian, who has an in-depth knowledge of allergy caused by hair dye, explains that like many women, Julie regularly coloured her hair at home, something she had done for around 20 years since she left school, so it was initially hard to

believe that the hair colour had been the cause.

He explains: ‘The more you are exposed to hair dyes – especially the darker colours – the more susceptible you are to a reaction.’

However, he suspects the real catalyst for the reaction in Julie’s case was probably a ‘black henna’ tattoo she’d got while on a sand safari in Dubai. So-called ‘black henna’ isn’t like normal henna at all as it contains high concentrations of the chemical PPD.

All permanent hair dyes contain PPD or similar chemicals, but because they all have the potential to be absorbed by, and change the body, they can only be used in very small amounts. Their use is very carefully regulated and ‘black henna’ tattoos like those applied on Julie, are not legal in the UK. Unfortunately for Julie, it was likely that colouring her hair after acquiring the black henna tattoo caused the allergic reaction.

Understanding that there is always a risk of reaction for both first-time and long-term users of hair colours, all hair dye manufacturers, trade associations and salon insurers insist on a patch test being applied before each and every hair dye application.

As was shown in BABTAC’s research, the general public and even many professionals are dangerously unaware of just how serious dye reactions can be.

Geoff Fell, the coroner at the inquest into Julie’s death, said: ‘The cosmetics industry has no accurate information on the level of allergic reaction to PPD. Not its scale, nature or severity. The industry has no real

idea where to direct its resources, their nature and how or where they are to be focused. There is a massive disconnect between independent research allergy figures and those gathered by the industry.’

So – always do a patch test: you could save a life. **N**

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