

Skin Conditions of Musicians

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Although skin conditions among musicians are uncommon, when they do occur, they may cause considerable discomfort and disability. The pattern of the condition very often indicates the instrument played.

Physical Trauma

The most common cause of skin conditions of musicians is relatively minor but repetitive physical trauma, resulting in folliculitis, paronychia, callus formation, and minor wounds that sometimes become secondarily infected. One of the most common conditions is the so-called "fiddlers' neck," affecting violin and viola players.¹ The condition consists of hyperpigmentation and lichenification on the left side of the neck just below the mandible, where the instrument is pressed during practice and performance. Folliculitis, sometimes with cyst formation, may also be seen, which often results in scarring.^{2,4} It has been noted that folliculitis most frequently occurs in players who play with badly fitting neck rests, with or without faulty techniques.⁵ Factors such as pressure, friction, rubbing, pinching, sweating, and poor hygiene contribute to its development.⁶ A similar condition occurs on the necks of cellists, which may sometimes resemble mechanical acne.⁷

Paronychia are important occupational hazards of pianists and harpists. Harpists may develop calluses on the sides or tips of the fingers, which may become irritated and painful. Harpists also frequently develop onycholysis and subungual hemorrhages. The fairly frequent formation of calluses in instrumentalists may provide protection against additional trauma and can thus be considered valid "occupational marks," which may denote the occupation of the person. Callosities are characteristic of the way musicians grasp and hold their instruments. Drummers and other percussionists, for example, are especially prone to developing calluses on their thumbs, index finger, and third finger, which do not necessarily impede their perform-

Table I.

The Most Common Allergens For Patch Testing Musicians

Nickel sulfate
Wood alcohols
Colophony (rosin)
Cobalt
p-Phenylenediamine
Propolis

Sawdust from the following woods
(diluted in white petrolatum):

- Ebony (*Diospyros sp.*)
- Brazilian rosewood (*Dalbergia nigra*)
- East Indian rosewood (*Dalbergia latifolia*)
- Cocobolo wood (*Dalbergia retusa*)
- African blackwood (*Dalbergia melanoxylon*)
- Madagascar ebony (*Diospyros celebica*)

ance. Clarinet and oboe players develop a characteristic callosity on the midportion of the upper lip, and among horn players, a circumscribed atrophy of the upper lip may occur.⁸ Additionally, ischemia of the lips and tears of oral mucosa may occur.⁹

Allergic Reactions

When allergic sensitization occurs in a string player, it is almost always due to rosin, which players repeatedly rub on their bows during practice and performance. In addition to causing dermatitis on the fingers and hands, the dust may result in dermatitis on the face and neck. Rosin is also used on the shoes of dancers to eliminate slippage on wooden floors.¹⁰

Various exotic woods are found in musical instruments. In 1957, Schwartz¹¹ reported contact dermatitis of the lower lip of flute players caused by sensitivity to the wood of their mouthpieces. Brazilian rosewood (*Dalbergia nigra All.*) is commonly used for violinists' chin rests and may induce dermatitis.⁶ This wood is also found in the mouthpieces of recorders. Patch testing with S-4'-hydroxy-4-methoxydalber-

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gione, 1% in petrolatum, is usually found to be positive in these cases. East Indian rosewood (*Dalbergia latifolia* Roxb.) is also employed for chin rests, and may be a cause of dermatitis.^{12,13} A common allergen such as *p*-phenylenediamine has been reported to induce allergic contact dermatitis when used for staining ebony chin rests of violins.¹⁴ Recorder players may develop contact allergy from cocobolo wood, a common wood used for these instruments.¹⁵ An immediate-type allergic reaction to a reed made of the wood *Arundo donax*¹⁶ has been observed in an atopic saxophonist.

For centuries, propolis (bee glue) has been used to varnish violins and other stringed instruments.¹⁷ Because propolis is also an ancient folk remedy, it has recently been used for self-treatment of a variety of diseases. Consequently, the frequency of dermatitis from this fairly potent allergen has recently increased. A comprehensive list of the most common allergens for patch testing musicians are outlined in Table I.

Other Conditions

Hyperhidrosis can be a serious problem for a variety of instrumentalists, especially pianists. The emotional stress of performing usually contributes to its severity. Because they share their instruments and mouthpieces, herpes labialis is common among musicians, especially brass players. The condition may be exacerbated by the occurrence of minor skin trauma while playing and during prolonged periods of practice.

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