

NEAR MISS

Gareth's Story – One Splash, Lasting Consequences

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Gareth still remembers the instant the cleaning product hit his eye.

It was a routine job in the dairy. He was down in the pit, getting ready to change the rubberware and giving the milking cups a general clean first.

Nothing unusual. Nothing he hadn't done plenty of times before.

Gareth admits he had always been fairly relaxed about safety when it came to the quick and 'easy' jobs.

"I was usually the first to say, 'It'll be right.' If something was only going to take a couple of minutes, you didn't think too much about putting goggles on or stopping to get everything organised."

That morning Gareth was using a handheld pressurised spray bottle that they'd had sitting on the shelf for a while to spray the cleaning solution across the cups. He was about halfway into the job when after giving the handle a few pumps, the nozzle seemed to block up. After some shakes and hitting the bottle forcefully, Gareth turned it around to have a look at the nozzle. With his hand still slightly on the trigger, the nozzle cleared and the cleaning solution suddenly sprayed towards him, catching him directly in one eye.

"The second it hit, I knew about it. My eye started burning straight away and I couldn't open it properly."

His employee immediately got him to water and began flushing the affected eye. For the next 15 minutes, they continued rinsing it before Gareth decided he really needed more help. On arriving at the dairy, his wife took one look at his face and called an ambulance.

"At first, I think part of me still thought I could get it washed out, give me some drops and I'd be right. But once the doctors started looking at the damage, I realised it was more serious than that."

The cleaning product had caused a chemical injury to Gareth's eye. His sight wasn't lost completely, but his vision was affected and recovery wasn't as simple or as quick as he had expected.

There were appointments, treatment and follow-up visits. For a period, everyday things such as driving, working around machinery and judging distances became much more difficult. Even as the eye began to heal, blurred vision and sensitivity remained a reminder of what had happened.



What frustrated Gareth most was knowing how easily the injury could have been prevented.

"It was just cleaning the cups. You do these jobs all the time and you don't really think of them as dangerous. If I'd had my eye protection on, we probably wouldn't be having this conversation."

Looking back, Gareth says familiarity was probably part of the problem.

On farms, the jobs we do every day can start to feel safe simply because we have done them dozens of times before. Chemicals get handled regularly. Equipment gets cleaned. Rubber ware gets changed. People become comfortable with the process.

But familiar doesn't necessarily mean safe.

Gareth was fortunate. His employee reacted quickly and started flushing his eye immediately, and he was taken for medical treatment without delay. His injury could have had considerably worse long term outcomes.

Today, his message is straightforward. "Don't wait until something happens before you start taking it seriously. It only takes a second. Put the glasses on, know what you're using and make sure the people around you know what to do if something goes wrong."

Where to from here?

Gareth's accident happened during an ordinary dairy task. There was no major equipment failure and no unusual set of circumstances. It was a routine job involving a chemical cleaning product that was used regularly.

That is exactly why incidents like this deserve our attention.

Understand the chemical before you use it

Dairy cleaning products can cause serious injury if they contact the eyes or skin. Workers need to know what products they are using, the risks involved and the precautions required. Safety Data Sheets (SDS) need to be readily accessible and workers should know where to find them and also be familiar with first aid actions.

Wear the required Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) – even for quick jobs

If a product requires eye or face protection, wear it every time it is handled. Cleaning a few cups or completing a job that "won't take long" doesn't change the potential consequences of chemical exposure.

Think about where the chemical can go

Splash and spray-back are easy to underestimate, particularly when cleaning equipment at close range. Consider the direction of the spray, pressure in the equipment and where your face and body are positioned before starting.

Be ready if something goes wrong

Everyone working with chemicals needs to know what to do following exposure. Appropriate emergency washing facilities need to be accessible, and first-aid actions should follow the product label and SDS. Prompt medical assessment can also be critical following chemical exposure to the eye.

In Gareth's case, having another person nearby who immediately started flushing his eye made a real difference.

Don't let familiarity reduce your awareness

The jobs we perform most often can sometimes be the ones where shortcuts creep in. We stop thinking about the hazard because nothing has happened on the previous occasions.

Gareth's accident is a reminder that farm safety is rarely about dramatic situations. More often, it comes down to ordinary jobs and small decisions.

The chemical doesn't know whether the job will take two minutes or two hours.

Take the extra few seconds. Put the eye protection on.

Further information:



Several WorkSafe Queensland Codes of Practice provide clear guidance on how incidents like this can be prevented. [Codes of practice | WorkSafe.qld.gov.au](https://www.worksafe.qld.gov.au/codes-of-practice)

Managing Risks of Hazardous Chemicals in the Workplace (WorkSafe Qld)

Managing Risks of Plant in the Workplace (WorkSafe Qld)

How to Manage Work Health and Safety Risks (WorkSafe Qld)

Why alkaline cleaners can be especially dangerous to your eyes

In dairy cleaning, alkaline cleaners primarily target organic matter – particularly:

- milk fats and grease
- proteins and milk residues
- other organic build-up on milking equipment

Both acidic and alkaline cleaning chemicals can cause serious eye injuries, but alkaline products can be particularly damaging.

Alkaline chemicals can penetrate quickly and deeply into the tissues of the eye. This means the damage may continue beneath the surface, potentially affecting structures deeper within the eye.

Alkaline eye injuries can lead to:

- damage and scarring of the cornea
- ongoing problems with vision
- cataracts or glaucoma in severe cases and
- permanent loss of vision.

Some alkaline products may not cause the level of immediate pain you would expect from such a serious injury, making it easy to underestimate the damage.

Common alkaline products include dairy and industrial cleaning products containing sodium hydroxide (caustic soda), drain cleaners, ammonia and bleach.

Managing the Risk

Chemical cleaning is a routine part of dairy work, but the risks need to be actively managed.

Provide accessible eyewash facilities – ensure suitable eyewash or washing facilities are located close to where chemicals are used and workers know how to use them.

Wear the right PPE – chemical-resistant gloves, protective clothing and appropriate eye or face protection should be worn as specified on the product label and SDS.

Know your chemicals – keep SDS readily accessible and make sure workers understand the hazards, safe handling requirements and first-aid instructions for the products they use.

Train your staff – workers need practical training in chemical handling, dilution, storage, PPE and what to do if there is a spill or exposure.

Be prepared for an emergency – ensure first-aid equipment is available and workers know how to respond immediately to chemical exposure. Having trained first aiders on farm is an important part of that preparation.

Check equipment and procedures – regularly inspect chemical containers, dispensing and cleaning equipment, and replace anything that is damaged, leaking or unsafe.

When it comes to chemical exposure, knowing what to do in the first few minutes can make a significant difference to the outcome. ■ ■

References:

1. Workplace Health and Safety Qld. 2021. *Managing risks of hazardous chemicals in the workplace-Code of Practice*.PDF Document. https://www.worksafe.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0027/72639/managing-risks-of-hazardous-chemicals-cop-2021.pdf
2. Total Cleaning Supplies 2023. *Understanding pH and Cleaning Chemicals*. Accessed 05 August 2026. <https://www.totalcleaning.com.au/blog/2023/05/15/https://incleanmagconz202207understanding-ph-and-cleaning-chemicals> 04 Aug