

Health hazards of women workers involved in cashewnut industry

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Meghalaya is one of the states of North East India where cashewnut cultivation and processing is an important new area in case of agro-industrial development. In the world scenario, India occupies a premier position contributing about 43 per cent of the cashewnut production. In North East India cultivation of cashewnut is mainly found in Meghalaya, Assam and Tripura. In Meghalaya particularly western part due to sandy loam, heavy rainfall, along with natural well drained provision as because of hilly terrain, cultivation of cashewnut is a most suitable cash crop. There are many cashewnut industries set up in these areas to process raw cashewnut. The finished products from the industries are sold in the entire North-East India besides west Bengal. These cashewnuts rank among the best in taste. In fact, it has been certified as the best in Asia in taste (Anonymous, 2007).

The raw cashew has a very acid content (caustic oil) which can burn the skin and produces noxious fumes when heated and, therefore, it is required to undergo an elaborate process of sun drying, roasting, breaking (shelling), heating and peeling to become suitable for consumption. The labour intensive processes are breaking (shelling) and peeling of brown skin where women are the majority of workers.

They perform extremely tedious time and labour intensive work resulting in fatigue and drudgery. All the time

unnatural squatting posture on a fourfold gunny bag are adopted by the women labour while performing these activities which create severe musculo-skeletal problems such as back pain, knee pain, arthritis, cervical pain, joint pain etc. The long static posture demands high physiological cost and low productivity. Due to the adoption of long static sitting posture on the ground, they always suffer from paraesthesia (tingling) in legs which may lead to many nerve and musculo-skeletal problem.

A study was envisaged by selecting 20 women workers purposively from one cashewnut industry of Meghalaya within the age group of 20 – 50 years. The mean age of women workers was 35.6 years, weight is 45.91 kg, with 153.75 cm height. VO_2 max of the respondent was 22.88 and body mass index (BMI) was 19.52 which can be considered as normal category.

The widely accepted definition of health is that given by the WHO (1984), which is "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely an absence of disease or infirmity". So, the aim of occupational health is "the promotion and maintenance of the highest degree of physical, mental and social well-being of workers in all occupations" (Park, 2009).

In this occupation health hazards expressed by the women worker in the activity were collected, causative