



# Delta flight attendants say their uniforms are making them lose their hair, break out in hives, and cough uncontrollably

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Delta Flight Attendant Uniform

### Delta

- Delta flight attendants say that they've experienced a variety of health problems in the past 18 months, problems they suspect have been caused by toxic chemicals in their new uniforms. They also say that the airline has failed to address the issues consistently or adequately.
- Employees at other airlines, including Alaska and American, have had similar complaints in recent years.
- The Association of Flight Attendants, which has been at the center of an organizing drive among Delta's nonunionized cabin-crew employees, says that poor quality control in the global supply chain that produces the uniforms — often treated to be stain-, wrinkle-, and flame-resistant — can lead to a dangerous amount of chemicals such as formaldehyde and heavy metals like nickel and chromium.
- Business Insider spoke with numerous flight attendants who say they've suffered from hives and respiratory issues and may have compromised their immune systems. They say that they've had trouble getting support from Delta.
- Delta says that it's worked to identify the cause — it commissioned a toxicology analysis, but the report — released in November — said that it did not find anything to account for the range of symptoms flight attendants are experiencing.
- Are you a flight attendant? Would you like to discuss your experiences? Email this reporter at [dslotnick@businessinsider.com](mailto:dslotnick@businessinsider.com).



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Skin lesions. Fatigue. Migraines. Hair loss.

These are a few of the symptoms that some Delta flight attendants say are being caused by the airline's stylish new uniforms.

The affected workers say the new uniforms feature more than just purple tops and gray slacks — they also come with toxic chemicals that are causing a number of health problems among the airline's cabin crew.

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The health complaints make Delta the latest airline to have employees suffering from a range of symptoms that they say are linked to their uniforms. Flight attendants at [Alaska Airlines](#) made similar complaints in 2012, and American Airlines employees began complaining about similar health issues in 2016.

Flight attendants at both airlines [said](#) they faced resistance from their employers when they reported the issues, including company claims that the uniforms were safe. In some cases, medical-leave requests and requests to wear different uniforms were rejected, with some attendants saying their jobs were threatened.

Both airlines have since taken steps to address the ongoing issue.

Delta, which has the largest group of nonunionized flight attendants in the US, has handled uniform complaints inconsistently, some employees say, and in the view, unfairly. Concerns over the uniforms, and the airline's handling of health scares, has helped fuel an organizing drive among Delta employees working with the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA), which represents flight attendants at 20 airlines.

The AFA said it would collect and test uniform pieces to try to definitively answer what, if anything, is causing the health problems.

But even while the issue takes center stage in the labor-relations campaign, and as Delta has begun universally instituting alternative uniform policies, flight attendants have faced 18 months of mystery illnesses without resources or impartial advocates, leading to a growing culture within the community of cabin crew members consisting of rumors, fears about health consequences and job security, and financial burden.

### Symptoms so severe that some flight attendants couldn't work

Delta switched to its latest uniforms, designed by Zac Posen with Lands' End, in 2018. They were the first new uniforms since 2006.

Shortly after that, some flight attendants started noticing strange symptoms — primarily women, but some male flight attendants too.

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As with the other flight attendants Business Insider spoke with, she spoke on condition of anonymity because she still works for the airline and was worried about retaliation.

The skin rash kept flaring up and getting worse, the flight attendant said, and she noticed it was worse after workdays. She went to urgent care a few times during layovers in different cities, wondering if it was allergies or if maybe she had run into bed bugs at a hotel.

Eventually, she made an appointment with a dermatologist in Atlanta, where she's based. Right away, he said that the hives looked like they were caused by a toxin exposure. He'd seen and treated flight attendants from Alaska and American, and he said that it was likely an issue with the new uniforms.

"I told him: 'No, I'm exposed to so many different people from different places and sleep in different hotels around the country. I bet I caught something.' And he told me no, it looked like it must be the uniform," she said.

Another flight attendant said she suspected the uniforms right away.

"I knew it was the uniform pretty quickly," she said, "just based on my relationship with my body and my health. I have to keep on top of everything."

Rather than hives or rashes, she got migraines, which she said she hadn't experienced before, and flu-like symptoms, including extreme fatigue.

"It just continued to worsen, to the point where I was having to call in sick," she said. "I was pretty scared to say anything because I didn't know how they'd handle it."

At first, she suspected that the main culprit was the uniform apron, which was unnaturally stiff and the subject of a variety of early complaints.

When she told her manager about her concerns, the supervisor said that the airline was working to "make the apron more comfortable," brushing aside the health concerns.

She stopped wearing the apron, but her health problems persisted.

Another employee said she began noticing symptoms within about a month of putting on the new uniform.

"I started having respiratory issues, a runny nose, an extremely dry cough in the back of the throat," she said.

She complained and was given a uniform made with different fabric, but the symptoms got even worse, she said. "By the end of the trip with that uniform, I was broken out in hives and ended up with a fever and a kidney infection."

All three people, along with other current and retired Delta flight attendants whom Business Insider spoke with, said that in seeking support and guidance for how to handle the situation they encountered other affected employees experiencing a variety of symptoms like hair loss, sinus and respiratory issues, irregular heartbeat, high blood pressure, vertigo, anxiety, weakened immune systems, and hormonal changes.

Several flight attendants said they had heard rumors that some new mothers had noticed a purple tinge in their breast milk, though Business Insider was unable to speak with anyone who had experienced this firsthand.

### A disjointed and inconsistent response

The airline's response to complaints has been marked by inconsistencies.

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despite the airline's reputation, which it [often touts](#), for openness and transparency.

Several attendants said they considered themselves lucky, based on what they've heard about the experiences their colleagues have had.

The flight attendant who said she broke out into hives said that everyone she spoke with — from her supervisor through upper management — was dismissive.

"They were really rude about it," she said. "They told me that 'there's no way the uniform could be doing this to your body,'" she said. "I didn't know if I was going to have a job anymore."

She was sent to airline-affiliated doctors and underwent "patch testing," a contact allergy test where patches containing small amounts of chemicals are placed on a patient's back to see which causes a reaction. She was placed on steroids for the hives, along with a variety of creams and antibiotics, all of which she had to pay for.

"Unless you're willing to sign your entire health record and history over to the airline, they weren't paying for it," she said. She added: "It was a lot of stress and a financial burden. It was all out of pocket for me."

The airline eventually offered a dress made with a different type of fabric. The Atlanta attendant said she has been wearing it, and though the hives have been less severe since switching to it, she is still getting them.

In November, the airline began allowing attendants to wear nonuniform business clothes purchased independently — "black-and-whites," as employees call them — after a media report in November drew attention to the AFA, the labor union, and its plans to test Delta's uniforms as part of an organizing drive among employees.

The Midwest flight attendant had a more positive experience. Once she realized that getting rid of her apron wasn't helping, she told her managers she simply couldn't wear the uniform anymore and still be functional. She was granted short-term disability leave and came back after the airline decided to start letting her wear black-and-whites.

At one point, however, she was told that she would lose her job if she refused to wear the uniform. They reversed course and let her wear the alternative uniform, and eventually allowed her to continue wearing black-and-whites, along with other affected employees.

The third flight attendant considers herself particularly lucky.

"I said I'm not going back to work until I don't have to wear this," she said. "So I was approved pretty quickly" to wear the black-and-white alternative pieces.

She had trouble accessing treatment for the various symptoms, however.

"They sent me to an allergist, who told me there was nothing he could do because it wasn't an allergy — it looked more like poisoning," she said. "He told me to go to a toxicologist, but Sedgwick" — Delta's disability administrator — "said the case was closed."

She ended up being charged out of pocket — as well as changing her diet and trying holistic-detoxification regimes. She also takes several daily medications, and while she still has symptoms, she's noticed some improvement since switching to the black-and-whites.

But she said several other employees, whom she has helped navigate through the process of getting approved for alternatives, faced significantly more resistance from the airline.

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## happening

Judith Anderson is an industrial hygienist. For 20 years, she has worked for the Association of Flight Attendants, which represents the cabin crew at 20 airlines.

Over her career, her main concern has been working to identify and prevent chemical exposures in plane cabins — focusing on things like cleaning solutions or fumes caused by jet fuel.

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Since 2011, though, a growing part of her caseload has been looking at chemicals in uniforms.

As airlines have rolled out new uniforms over the past decade, they've increasingly worked with designers and manufacturers to create garments that travel well and can withstand the demands of attendants' jobs, which, in addition to pouring drinks and prepping meals, can include a variety of safety tasks on the ground before and after flights, as well as managing evacuations in an emergency landing.

They've called for garments that are stain-resistant, wrinkle-free, and offer a degree of fire resistance. The uniforms must also offer some stretch or flexibility while retaining their shape. Airlines also look for an opportunity to use the uniforms as an extension of on-board branding, to highlight and reinforce the flight experience for customers.

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Often, accomplishing that calls for treatments with various dyes and chemicals. Pieces are sourced from factories abroad, Anderson said, with low quality-control standards resulting in inconsistent application of chemicals, which, unlike dye, are typically invisible. The same is true when preservatives are applied in shipping containers.

"Some of the chemicals we learned to look for in the Alaska garments were heavy metals like nickel and chromium, also irritant and allergenic dyes," she said. "Also formaldehyde, stain, and flame retardants — the list goes on."

Alaska eventually recalled the uniforms, Anderson said, and offered an interim option. The airline is now preparing to roll out new "high-end, high quality garments, that we're really pleased about."

The AFA does not represent American Airlines flight attendants, but it does represent employees at several of the airline's wholly owned subsidiaries, which operate regional flights and outfit their staff in the same uniforms.

"We tested those garments and found similar chemicals that were in the Alaska ones," she said. "Not all the same, and there are so many chemicals to look for in clothes, but a lot of overlap, like the metals, dyes, and formaldehyde."

"And now this issue has come up with Delta," she said, "plus reports of the purple dye bleeding onto people's skin."

Delta Flight Attendant Purple Dye

Provided to Business Insider

The dye has been a target of suspicion. Flight attendants have noticed it rubbing off clothing onto airplane jump seats and seatbelts, and even their skin. Several attendants said that they were offered gray clothing, similar to what male employees wear, but some men have also experienced health issues that seemed linked to the uniforms. While some of the suspected chemicals can be used in safe quantities to treat clothing — an independent body, OEKO-TEX, offers safe standards and can certify products — Anderson said that a lack of oversight of the global supply chain for the uniforms, combined with a lack of testing before the pieces are distributed to employees, has led to inconsistent application, and partly explains why only some employees have experienced issues.

"There are no rules for chemical contents in clothes," she said. "There are recommendations for maximum allowed amounts of some chemicals, but there's no regulation that says that if you import garments from overseas to the US, they have to be tested for any chemicals and the amounts have to be below a certain level."

The inconsistencies with how the airlines have dealt with the issue stem from the unfamiliarity of effects caused by toxic chemicals in clothing and scale.

Delta, for example, has 25,000 flight attendants. Not everyone has had symptoms, but replacing the uniforms for the entire workforce would be a massive undertaking, and it's unclear who would bear the costs.

"It's an issue that was unforeseen before," Sara Nelson, president of the AFA, said. "We had dealt with issues like wool allergies and individual issues with specific fabrics. But this is completely different."

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"It's very difficult to define," Nelson said. "It doesn't just happen overnight, and it affects the population in different ways depending on your genetic makeup, past exposure over the course of your life, and what you may have been sensitized to."

"It's not something when you roll out the uniform on the first day, all of a sudden 20 percent of the population is having these severe reactions," she added. "It's an issue that takes a little bit of time to fully incubate."

Because the uniforms have been out at Delta for 18 months, the issue has "matured," Nelson said.

A group of attendants filed a class-action lawsuit against Lands' End in May. The case has since been [narrowed](#) to include only those who live and are based in New York.

## Seeking definitive answers from lab tests

A [laboratory analysis](#) commissioned by the airline found "no chemicals that could have been eluted (transferred) from the textile in sweat or emitted to air that could account for the rates of dermal or respiratory effects reported," but the APA is planning to test a range of the uniforms itself, looking for the same chemicals it found in garments from Alaska and American Airlines.

The union has asked Delta flight attendants to send new, unworn, packaged garments for testing. Anderson said that once she receives "an appropriate selection," she'll send them to a specialty lab to start testing them. "We'll look for the top tier chemicals that you should look for first in clothes," she said, "not that we'll necessarily answer the question of what the problem is because the mixtures of chemical compounds in clothes can be so complex."

From there, they'll start looking for other chemicals, including ones found in other airlines' uniforms, and any others that have been linked to health problems.

However, she expects that, like the symptoms that have been manifesting, results will be inconsistent between each individual article of clothing.

"It's very complex to try to deconstruct all the fabrics, gather the data on the symptoms that people are recording, and then figure out what you should look for because there are thousands of chemicals added to clothes," she said.

"People always want a smoking gun. They want to know 'Oh, it's high levels of chromium' or something. And maybe there is a smoking gun in this case, I don't know. But in the past, we've seen varying levels of varying different allergenic and irritant compounds in the clothing," she said.

"And that should be enough to convince an airline to just recall the garments and start over, until they can ensure that the garments that they're providing are safe."

In the meantime, Delta is offering flight attendants a reimbursable allowance to purchase black-and-whites. But it is unclear whether the airline will assume further healthcare costs for affected employees.

In a statement, Delta said it is working to offer alternative uniform options.

"Our top priority has been and continues to be addressing our employees' concerns, which is why we have been working directly with them to offer numerous alternative garment options, creating a new female gray suiting collection and providing access to the country's top medical experts."

Lands' End declined to comment, citing the ongoing litigation.

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