

# Work-Related Asthma

## From what kinds of jobs or industries can I get asthma?

Laboratory animal workers, hospital workers, food processing workers, auto and auto parts manufacturing, farmers and grain handlers, bakers, and beauty shop workers are all examples of places and jobs where people have gotten asthma from exposures at work.

## How can something at my job be causing or making my asthma worse?

There are over 350 substances in the work place that can cause or worsen asthma (asthmagens). These substances can be from chemicals, plant matter, or animals. Even very low levels of exposure to some of these substances can cause or worsen asthma.

Here are some examples of substances that can cause or make asthma worse:

**Chemicals:** isocyanates, metal working fluids, coolants, chromium salts, cleaning agents and disinfectants, welding fumes

**Plants:** flour dust, soybean dust, wood dust, pine resin

**Animals:** pet dander, shellfish, egg proteins, poultry droppings

## When to suspect your asthma is work-related.

- Your breathing problems are worse at work.
- Your symptoms improve or are better when away from work.
- You got asthma after you started a new job.
- You are an adult with new-onset asthma.
- You had asthma already but it has gotten worse in your adult life.

## How can I find out if my asthma is work-related?

There are some breathing tests you can do to see if there is a relationship between your work and your asthma. Ask your doctor about peak flow meter tests both before and after your work shift, and pulmonary function testing before going on vacation and after you return from vacation. Try to see a health care provider who specializes in occupational health if possible.

## What can I do if a substance at work is causing or making my asthma worse?

The safest thing to do is to avoid working with or around the asthmagen that is causing or making your asthma worse. Talk with your employer about your concerns and possible solutions. There are many ways to minimize exposure to asthmagens. The asthmagen that is giving you breathing problems can be removed, the asthmagen can be substituted or switched with another product that will not cause symptoms, equipment can be installed to reduce the asthmagen, or you can be moved to a different location or shift. Using personal protection equipment like dust masks or respirators usually does not provide enough protection once you have asthma.

## Are there other things I can do to help my breathing?

Yes. Always read the Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) for the products you work with in your job. Those sheets will give you important information about how to keep yourself safe and what sorts of health problems could be associated with working with those products.

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However, be aware that many times all ingredients are not listed, including information or substances that can cause asthma. If you smoke, work with your doctor to quit smoking.

### What can my company do to make sure no one else gets asthma?

- Your company can keep up to date about substances that may be asthmagens, reduce their use, and notify their employees.
- They can implement changes based on the hierarchy of controls: elimination, substitution, engineering, and administrative interventions.
- They can provide information and resources to workers about work-related asthma so they know what to look for in their work environment.
- They can work with local associations for health and safety professionals and support WRA education and training for their health and safety staff.

### How can I get my work placed inspected?

If you want Minnesota OSHA to inspect your work place, you can file an anonymous complaint. You can obtain a complaint form by calling MNOSHA at 1-877-470-6742 or you can go online at:

[www.doli.state.mn.us/mnosha.html](http://www.doli.state.mn.us/mnosha.html).

### Here are some facts about work-related asthma that you might not know:

- Even if the amount of chemicals or other substances in the air are below Minnesota OSHA standards, this does not mean your asthma is not caused or made worse by work. Even low levels of exposure to substances that are within the Minnesota OSHA limits can cause work-related asthma. Some substances that can cause asthma do not have Minnesota OSHA air standards. Things like leaks or spills can also cause asthma, from a one-time high level exposure.
- Wheezing, coughing, being short of breath and having chest tightness are all symptoms that are not normal. If you have these symptoms at work, if they get worse when you are at work, or if they get better when you are away from work on weekends or vacations, you should tell your doctor.
- If you have been exposed to a substance for a long time that can cause asthma, your asthma may continue even when you are no longer exposed. The longer you wait to get out of a job where you have these symptoms, the greater the chance that you will still have asthma even if you leave that job.
- Work-related asthma occurs both among people who smoke and those who do not smoke cigarettes. Smoking cigarettes puts you at risk of lung diseases such as emphysema, which has similar symptoms as asthma.

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