

Work-related Asthma

What is work-related asthma?

Work-related asthma is a type of lung disease. It means that something in your workplace is causing you to have difficulty breathing. You may not have had asthma symptoms before but you cough, wheeze, and feel that you cannot breathe easily at work. Or, you may already have asthma and notice that it gets worse at work.

How do people get work-related asthma?

People who work in environments where they are exposed to asthma triggers have a higher risk of getting work-related asthma. Asthma triggers are things that can cause asthma or make asthma worse. Some common asthma triggers at work include:

- Plant materials – like latex, flour, grain dust or wood dust
- Furry or feathered animals – dander, urine, feces or saliva from these animals
- Chemicals used in spray painting, insulation, plastics
- Enzymes used in detergents and other industry
- Fumes in the air from things like metal, chlorine, sulfur, ammonia or formaldehyde
- Cleaning products
- Metal dusts, metalworking fluids

Jobs where asthma triggers are commonly found

- Bakers
- Cleaners (domestic and industrial)
- Farmers
- Grain elevator workers
- Hairdressers/salon workers
- Health care workers
- Laboratory workers and animal handlers
- Metal workers and welders
- Plastics workers
- Spray painters and foam insulation workers
- Woodworkers and foresters

What are the signs of having work-related asthma?

- You have breathing problems that are worse at work
- You feel better when you are away from work
- You got asthma after you started a new job or after a new process is started at work

Can work-related asthma be prevented?

There are steps you can take to reduce your chances of developing work-related asthma or having asthma get worse at work.

Always be aware of any chemicals, materials or products you work with, especially those that you may breathe into your lungs. Learn ways to protect yourself. Often Safety Data Sheets (SDS) can give you ideas how to protect yourself from the chemicals or products you work with. For example, first aid and spill information. If you do not know where these sheets are, contact your supervisor. The manufacturer of the product can be another source of information.

Smoking can make asthma worse. If you smoke, talk to your health care provider about quitting or call: 1-800-QUIT-NOW (800-784-8669) to connect to a Quitline coach. Free tools are available at the [QuitPlan](#) website.

What do I do if I start having asthma symptoms or my asthma is getting worse?

Get help from a doctor for breathing problems before they become worse. See your healthcare provider as soon as you start having symptoms. Keep a record of your symptoms and when and where they occur. Share that record with your healthcare provider.

Talk with your supervisor about your concerns and work together to find solutions.

- Avoid working with or around the material that is causing or making your asthma worse.
- Check on the feasibility of substituting a different material that won't trigger asthma symptoms.

Some additional actions that can be taken include:

- Evaluate the job task to determine options, like exhaust ventilation, filters and dust control methods that can reduce contact with airborne contaminants.
- Evaluate the job task and consider the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) like appropriate respirators, gloves, goggles and clothing to protect against asthma triggers.
- Inspect the heating ventilating and air conditioning (HVAC) system to ensure all components are functioning and maintained properly.
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What else can I do?

To request a safety and health consultation at your workplace, ask your employer to contact the Minnesota Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MNOSHA). The consultation is confidential, free, and does not result in citations or penalties. Call 1-800-657-3776 or submit an electronic request at [Minnesota's DOLI](#). Learn more at the Minnesota [DOLI consultation website](#). If you feel safety and health conditions have not been managed at your workplace, you can file an anonymous complaint with Minnesota OSHA compliance. To file a complaint, call MNOSHA at 1-877-470-6742 or go online to [MN OSHA compliance](#).