Asthma and your workplace

Summary

- If your asthma symptoms are worse during the working week, you may be experiencing occupational asthma.
- It is important to avoid exposure to the triggers in your workplace.
- Work together with your employer to develop strategies to reduce your exposure to substances that trigger your asthma.

There are many substances in the workplace that may cause asthma to develop, or trigger asthma symptoms in someone who already has asthma. If you experience asthma symptoms at work, and these symptoms improve when you are away from work, such as during holidays or on weekends, you may have what is called work-related or occupational asthma.

Occupational asthma can occur in many types of workplaces, but is most commonly reported where people are working with flour or grains and isocyanates (chemicals which are found in paints as hardening agents).

Other substances may include wood dust (such as western red cedar, redwood, and oak), strong cleaning products, chemicals, or animal allergens.

Occupational asthma may be indicated by symptoms that:

- vary during the working week or shift
- occur at night, in the morning after significant exposure, or during the working day
- improve over weekends or holidays.

Work-aggravated asthma is different from occupational asthma, which occurs when there is sensitisation to a substance encountered at work. Work-aggravated asthma occurs when people who already have asthma are exposed to factors, such as gases or fumes, smoke, dust or cold dry air, which irritate the airways, causing asthma symptoms to occur and make a pre-existing condition worse.

Asthma and high-risk jobs

Some jobs are more likely to affect a person with asthma because of the triggers in the environment. These include:

- baking and pastry cooks – flour, additives and sodium metabisulphate
- car repairs and panel beating – epoxy resins and organic solvents
- electronics – solder fumes
- farming – animal fur, feathers and grain dust
- fire fighting – smoke and combustion products
- foam manufacturers – polyurethane
- healthcare workers – latex gloves
- garage attendants – car exhaust fumes
- grain handling – fumigants and grain dust
- hairdressing – dyes, perfumes and sprays
- metal refining – acids, chlorines, aluminium and heavy metal salts
- oil refining – hydrocarbon mists
• painting and decorating – paint additives and solvents
• printing – dyes and solvents
• woodworking – wood dust
• working with animals – animal fur and animal urine.

Reactive airways dysfunction syndrome (RADS)

If you have inhaled a high dose of a substance that causes damage to the airways, possibly as part of an industrial accident or spillage, you may temporarily experience breathlessness and a wheeze similar to asthma. This is called reactive airways dysfunction syndrome (RADS).

Symptoms usually occur within 24 hours of a single exposure to very high concentrations of a chemical spill, irritant gases, corrosive mists or solvent vapours. Usually, symptoms will gradually improve as your airways heal, but occasionally, workers can be left with permanent symptoms.

Preventing exposure to triggers

For some people with asthma, ongoing exposure to triggers can cause continued inflammation and excess mucus production in the airways, and can make a person’s asthma worse. Where possible, workplaces should avoid using substances that can trigger asthma. This can be achieved by no longer using the substance or substituting it for one that is less hazardous to the person’s health.

Where removal of the workplace trigger is not possible, reducing exposure by using local exhaust ventilation systems or Australian Standards approved respiratory protection devices can also help exposure to triggers. The employer and employee should work together to develop strategies to reduce exposure to triggers and irritants in the workplace.

Early treatment for workplace asthma is crucial

If you did not have asthma previously, and think you have developed asthma following exposure to substances in the workplace, it is important to seek medical advice for tests and accurate diagnosis.

Where to get help

• Your doctor
• Pharmacist
• Your health and safety representative at work
• WorkSafe Victoria Tel. 1800 136 089 or (03) 9641 1444
• The Asthma Foundation of Victoria Tel. 1800 ASTHMA (278 462)

Things to remember

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• It is important to avoid exposure to the triggers in your workplace.
• Work together with your employer to develop strategies to reduce your exposure to substances that triggers your asthma.