



Respiratory Care WA

Asthma | COPD | Respiratory Health



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respiratorycarewa.org.au

Occupational Asthma

This information sheet is designed to inform teenagers and adults about the occurrence, causes and treatment of occupational asthma.

Cases of occupational asthma have been reported where the individual is sensitive to trigger factors that occur in the workplace. It may take some time to diagnose workplace asthma, and regular peak flow measurements can help with this.

Some people find that they are free of symptoms at the weekends and during the holidays, but symptoms then recur when they return to work. Some people may find that symptoms occur when they are doing a particular task at work, whereas others may find their symptoms are triggered in certain areas within the workplace. These may result from exposure to gas or dust irritants or working in a cold, dry environment, particularly when physical effort is required. Where fumes, dust and fine particles can be a problem, safe work practices and procedures should be in place to avoid unnecessary exposure to hazards. Precautions might include the use of personal masks and respirators, air filtration and installation of exhaust fans over equipment.

People who develop asthma as an adult should consider and investigate the possibility of an occupational cause. Once occupational asthma is diagnosed, the best option is for the worker to move to another area where they are not exposed to the environmental agents responsible. This may result in considerable financial loss to the individual, particularly where their skills cannot be easily transferred to another area or retraining is involved.

Treatment for occupational asthma is similar to that for ordinary asthma, based on the use of the preventative corticosteroids and removal of the triggering agent. It is inappropriate to continue treatment and remain in the same offending environment, as this may lead to the development of more severe asthma.

In general, those who are diagnosed early with occupational asthma and move away from the triggering agent at the earliest opportunity, avoiding ongoing exposure, can expect their asthma to improve and may become symptom free. However, those who have been diagnosed late after exposure for many years, may find that they require ongoing treatment to keep them free of symptoms despite avoiding continued exposure. For people with asthma it may be wise to avoid jobs where there is a high possibility of exposure to triggers factors that may be a problem.



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The following page shows some jobs where occupational asthma has been diagnosed with the identified triggering agent:

Work Category	Responsible Agent
Baking and pastry cooks	flour, additives, metabisulphite
Food processing	Metabisulphite
Soft drinks processing and wine making	Metabisulphite
Grain handling	Grain dusts, fumigants
Woodworking and joinery	Wood dust particularly from hard wood
Spray painting, panel beating and car repairs	Isocyanates, epoxy resins, organic solvents
Floor varnishing	Isocyanates
Painting and decorating	Paint additives
Laboratory animals	Animal dander, urine
Foundries and moulders	Isocyanates
Electronics	Solder fumes
Fire Fighting	Smoke and Combustion products
Metal Refining and Processing	Acids, Chlorine, Heavy Metal Salts, Aluminium
Shellfish Processing	Shellfish Antigens
Oil Refining	Hydrocarbon Mists
Printing	Azo Dyes, Organic Solvents
Farming (animals, birds and grain)	Animal dander, feathers and grain dusts
Chemical Laboratories	Acids and Solvents
Photographic developing and X-ray Converters	Darkroom Chemicals
Hairdressing	Dyes, Perfumes and Sprays
Foam Manufacturers and Converters	Polyurethane
Garage Attendant	Car Exhaust Fumes