

INFORMATION SHEET

Asthma friendly environments - your workplace

There are many substances in the workplace that may cause asthma to develop in a previously healthy person or trigger asthma symptoms in someone that already has asthma. Exposure may occur while you are performing a particular task or while working in a particular area.

Occupation 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.

High risk Industries

Some industries 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** – isocyanates
- **Garage attendants** – car exhaust fumes
- **Grain handling** – fumigants and grain dust
- **Hairdressing and nail technicians** – dyes, perfumes and sprays
- **Metal refining** – acids, chlorines, irritants resulting from aluminium smelting process
- **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
- **Health care workers** – latex gloves

Reactive Airways Dysfunction Syndrome (RADS)

When people with asthma inhale irritants into their airways, they may experience symptoms similar to that which can be experience with asthma such as shortness of breath and a wheeze. This is known as reactive airways dysfunction syndrome (RADS). Symptoms usually appear within 24 hours of exposure.

Preventing exposure to triggers

For people with asthma, triggers cause inflammation or swelling in one's airways. Ongoing exposure to such triggers causes continued inflammation and swelling in the airways and makes ones 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 the trigger substance for one that is less hazardous to health.

Reducing exposure to triggers

Where removal of the workplace trigger is not possible, reducing exposure can also assist with taking control of one's asthma. For example, where appropriate, install local exhaust ventilation, or use Australian Standards approved respiratory protection devices. The employer and employee should work together to develop strategies to reduce exposure to triggers and irritants in the workplace.

Early treatment 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. Your condition may improve by avoiding any further exposure.

It could be dangerous to your health to ignore asthma symptoms and to continue being exposed to substances to which you are reacting. Management of occupational asthma does not always mean leaving your place of work. Strategies can be developed to reduce your exposure to triggers/irritants.

Things to remember

- 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

Where to get help

- Your doctor or pharmacist.
- Your occupational health and safety representative at work
- WorkSafe Victoria – www.worksafe.vic.gov.au
- The Asthma Foundation of Victoria:

T: (03) 9326 7088

E: advice@asthma.org.au

W: www.asthma.org.au

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