

Government Resources

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Working together to improve health

Asthma in the Workplace: What Every Health Care Provider and Worker Should Know

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Asthma In the Workplace can be a challenge for all concerned. For the person with asthma, the goal is to treat the condition and prevent attacks so that he or she can continue to work. For the physician, the goal is to provide advice on treatment options, as well as prevention and, in some cases, a discussion of whether and how work may have contributed to the disease. And for the employer, the goal is to maintain a productive employee and a safe workplace.

What is Work-Related

(Occupational) Asthma? It is sometimes difficult to know whether asthma is work-related. Typical features include:

- ◆ Symptoms occur ONLY or MAINLY at work
- ◆ CERTAIN ACTIVITIES at work cause the attacks
- ◆ The asthma improves when away from work, especially on weekends and holidays
- ◆ There are CHEMICALS, ANIMALS, or exposures at work that are known to cause asthma and/ or allergies

Causes of Work-Related Asthma

There are 2 types of work-related asthma. ALLERGIC asthma can be related to exposure to laboratory animals, enzymes used in detergents and soaps, in food products, wood products, latex, pharmaceuticals, and a large number of other natural and synthetic materials. NON-ALLERGIC asthma can occur with exposure to irritating chemicals. Both types of work-related asthma have similar symptoms and treatments.

Common Causes of Occupational Asthma

Adhesives	Fertilizers
Plastics and epoxies	Fluxes
Animals	Sterilizers
Cereals and flours	Isocyanates
Cleaning products	Metals
Pharmaceuticals	Seafoods
Dyes	Wood dusts
Enzymes	Pesticides

Diagnosis of Work-Related Asthma

Diagnosis of occupational asthma involves a careful occupational history, often supplemented by information such as material safety data sheets. Diagnostic testing may include pre- and post-shift pulmonary function, serial peak flows, non-specific challenge tests, or allergy testing.

Management of Work-Related Asthma

Management considerations include pharmacologic treatment, as well as exposure reduction. In some cases it may be necessary monitor the worker closely to prevent permanent disability, while in other cases there may be a need to remove the worker from exposure altogether. It may also be necessary to monitor the work area, so discussion with the company may be required. The physician should always discuss these issues carefully with the worker, so there is complete understanding of the options. It may be helpful to consider a referral to specialists with experience in work-related asthma.

Occupational Asthma is Reportable!

Under COMAR §6-701 and COMAR §6-702, work-related injuries and illnesses, including work-related asthma, are reportable in Maryland.

Q. How do I report?

A. Just go to <http://phpa.dhmv.maryland.gov/OEHFP/EH/SitePages/occupational-safety-and-health-in-maryland.aspx> and click on “Confidential Report of Occupational/ Environmental Disease.”