

Work-Related Asthma Fact Sheet

You have been given this fact sheet because your doctor suspects that exposures at your place of employment may have caused your asthma or are making your asthma worse.

Q. From what kinds of jobs or industries can I get asthma?

- A. Laboratory animal workers, hospital workers, food processing workers, auto and auto parts manufacturing, farmers and grain handlers, bakers, and beauty shop workers are all examples of places and jobs where people have gotten asthma from exposures at work.

Q. How can something at my job be causing or making my asthma worse?

- A. There are over 300 substances in the work place that can cause asthma. These substances can be from chemicals, plant matter or animals. Even very low levels of exposure to some of these substances can cause asthma. Any irritant at a high enough concentration can cause more asthma symptoms if you already have asthma.

Here are some examples of substances that can cause or make asthma worse:

Chemicals: isocyanates, metal working fluids, coolants, chromium salts, cleaning agents and disinfectants, welding fumes

Plants: flour dust, soybean dust, wood dust, pine resin

Animals: pet dander, shellfish, egg proteins, poultry droppings

Q. How can I tell if it's something from my job that's related to my asthma?

- A. There are some breathing tests you can do to see if there is a relationship between your work and your asthma. Ask your doctor about these tests: peak flow meter and pre- and post-shift or pre- and post-vacation pulmonary function testing.

When to suspect your asthma is work-related:

- your breathing problems are worse at work
- your symptoms improve or are better when away from work
- you got asthma after you started a new job
- you are an adult with new-onset asthma
- you had asthma already but it has gotten worse in your adult life

Q: What should I do if my asthma is work-related?

- A: The sooner you are no longer exposed to the substance at work that is causing your asthma, the better the chance that your asthma symptoms will improve or go away completely.

Q: What can I do if a substance at work is causing or making my asthma worse?

- A: The safest thing to do is to avoid working with or around the substance that is causing or making your asthma worse. In some cases, your employer may be able to switch you to a different job. In other cases, the chemical or substance that is giving you breathing problems can be substituted or switched to a different substance that will not cause those symptoms. Using personal protection equipment like dust masks or respirators usually does not provide enough protection once you have asthma.

Q: Are there other things I can do to help my breathing?

- A: Yes. Always read the Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) for the products you work with in your job. Those sheets will give you important information about how to keep yourself safe and what sorts of health problems could be associated with working with those products. However, be aware that many times all ingredients are not listed, including information on substances that can cause asthma. If you smoke, work with your doctor to quit smoking.

Q: What can my company do to make sure no one else gets asthma?

- A: Your company can reduce exposures and provide medical screening to individuals who work with substances that can cause asthma. Your company can also call MSU at **1-800-446-7805** for a copy of a "Recommended Medical Screening Protocol for People Exposed to Work-Related Allergens."

Q: How can I get more information on work-related asthma?

- A: Look at the "Worksites" section of www.GetAsthmaHelp.org or the MSU occupational health web site: www.chm.msu.edu/oem.

If you want Michigan OSHA to inspect your work place, you can file an anonymous complaint. You can obtain a complaint form by calling MIOSHA at **1-800-866-4674**.

Here are some facts about work-related asthma that you might not know:

Because Michigan OSHA says the air levels are "safe" does not mean your asthma is not caused or made worse by work. Even low levels of exposure to substances that are within the Michigan OSHA limits can cause work-related asthma. Some substances that can cause asthma do not have Michigan OSHA air standards. Things like leaks or spills can also cause asthma, from a one-time high level exposure.

Wheezing, coughing, being short of breath and having chest tightness are all symptoms that are not normal. If you have these symptoms at work, if they get worse when you are at work, or if they get better when you are away from work on weekends or vacations, you should tell your doctor.

If you have been exposed to a substance for a long time that can cause asthma, your asthma may continue even when you are no longer exposed. The longer you wait to get out of a job where you have these symptoms, the greater the chance that you will still have asthma even if you leave that job.

Work-related asthma occurs both among people who smoke and those who do not smoke cigarettes. Smoking cigarettes puts you at risk of lung diseases such as emphysema, which has similar symptoms as asthma.