

ALERT

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IT COULD BE WORK-RELATED ASTHMA by Kenneth Rosenman, MD

So maybe you wheeze, or are short of breath at work. You find on the weekends or on vacation that your symptoms get better or go away completely. Maybe some of your co-workers are having similar problems. The symptoms described above may suggest work-related asthma, and need to be checked out right away.

Typically, there is a period which may last months to years where you work with these substances without any problems. Sometimes, before asthma symptoms develop, people have a stuffy or runny nose which gets better away from work. The start of work-related asthma may happen with a change in the job, changes in the level of exposure to an allergen, spills or other high level exposures.

The work exposures may make a person's existing asthma worse, or cause new asthma either from becoming allergic to a workplace substance, or from exposure to a high level of an irritant chemical. Over 400 substances that can cause asthma in the workplace have been found, and the list is still growing. These substances include animal proteins, such as dander or feathers; plants, such as flour or wood dust; or chemicals, such as disinfectants or stainless steel fumes. Even very low levels of exposure to some of these substances can aggravate or cause asthma. However, employees, employers and health care professionals are often unaware of the link between a person's asthma and exposure to substances in the work place.

If you are concerned about exposures at work, you need to make a point of telling your doctor. Most doctors have had almost no training in work-related diseases. If your doctor says that he or she doesn't have the expertise to evaluate the possible link between your symptoms and work exposure, ask for a referral. There are doctors who specialize in the field of occupational and environmental medicine and who will be able to find out if your asthma is caused or aggravated by exposures at work, and whether it is healthy for you to continue to be around these exposures. People with a shorter work exposure and people with asthma symptoms who stop their work exposure in a shorter period of time are more likely to get better and not develop a chronic problem than people who are exposed to the asthma-causing agent for a longer amount of time. Ideally, the company will help you find a non-exposed job. Sometimes, however, this doesn't happen and you will need to work with your doctor, and perhaps, file for workers' compensation.

Prevention of work-related asthma by employers is key:

- ▶ Substitute asthma-causing agents with less hazardous substances.
- ▶ Train workers about the signs and symptoms of breathing problems, how to recognize asthma-causing substances, and how to protect themselves.
 - ▶ Set up a medical screening and tracking program to identify employees with work-related asthma as soon as the disease begins.
 - ▶ Assign any employee who develops asthma to a non-exposed job as soon as they are identified.

Visit www.GetAsthmaHelp.org, or <http://web2.chm.msu.edu/oem/index.htm> for more information about work-related asthma.



Dr. Ken Rosenman is a Professor of Medicine and Chief of the Division of Occupational and Environmental Medicine at Michigan State University

Work-related asthma develops after a period of time of exposure where the person has no breathing problems. This symptom-free time can range from months to more than 20 years.



- 🌿 The overall annual incidence rate of work-related asthma in Michigan is 3.4 cases per 100,000 workers per year, 1989-1999.
- 🌿 The rate of work-related asthma for blacks is 2.1 times the rate for whites.
- 🌿 Michigan's Wayne and Oakland counties had the highest number of work-related asthma patients, 1988-2001.
- 🌿 The automobile manufacturing industry has the highest average annual incidence rate of work-related asthma in Michigan, 1988-2001.

Source: Rosenman KD, Reilly MJ, and Kalinowski DJ. 2001 Annual Report on Work-Related Asthma in Michigan. July 25, 2002. (<http://web2.chm.msu.edu/oem/asthma/01asthma.pdf>)

ASTHMA COALITION COLUMN



Coalitions to Advocate for School Inhaler Law

It's a problem across the state- all districts or schools are not letting students with asthma carry and use their inhalers. A Michigan law, passed in 2000, states that students may carry and use their inhaler to relieve asthma symptoms or before exercise to prevent symptoms from starting. Schools are protected from liability related to inhaler self-use under the law, as long as they have copies of written permission from the student's health care provider and parent. But schools may not allow students to carry inhalers if there is a school district policy to the contrary.

"What schools don't seem to realize" said Phyllis Brenner, a member of the Detroit Asthma Coalition, "is that the potential danger of children not having access to their inhalers could result in a child's death. The related trauma to the other children and school staff also doesn't need to happen, if school policy supports the Michigan inhaler law."

The coalitions have chosen to pursue this issue as an advocacy project for the coming year. At the August 25 Summit of Asthma Coalitions, trained advocacy facilitators gave tools and tips to coalition members who were eager to begin. Each coalition that participates in this project will explore local school policies to find the barriers keeping students from carrying their inhalers. They will then design an advocacy plan to influence decision-makers and/or change school district policies. This will likely include education of key school staff.

Want to become involved in this project? Visit GetAsthmaHelp.org and contact your local asthma coalition.

Please direct questions and comments about this newsletter to:

MI Asthma Communication Network
c/o American Lung Assoc. of Michigan
403 Seymour Avenue
Lansing, MI 48933-1179
phone: 1-866-395-8647
e-mail: info@GetAsthmaHelp.org

FALL ASTHMA TIPS:

Got asthma? Get a flu shot!

The CDC now recommends influenza (flu) vaccine for all persons age 50 years and older and anyone age 6 months and older who are in a high-risk group-- this includes people with asthma.

Many people with asthma don't get them, though. A recent study by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that only one-third of adults getting a flu shot. Younger adults with asthma are even less likely to take the advice, with only 21 percent of asthmatics ages 18 to 49 getting the flu vaccine in 2001.

Flu shots can help keep you from getting more than the flu. They can also help you avoid other flu-linked problems such as pneumonia, bronchitis and ear infections.

While the best time to get flu vaccine is October or November, getting vaccinated in December or later can still protect you against the flu. If you have asthma, talk to your doctor about getting a flu shot as soon as they are available.



Holiday Treatment



When holiday times roll around, people who live with asthma need to decide-- real or artificial tree? Be aware that both types can cause problems, but it's probably wisest to go artificial, since real trees can have some known triggers, like scents and mold.

Artificial trees can also be a source of mold and dust if stored wrong. Try wiping off your artificial tree with a damp cloth before setting it up. It's also a good idea to use plastic, glass or metal decorations that can't hold dust mites. Clean lights and wash fabric and other decorations each year before placing on the tree. Store your tree according to manufacturer's instructions to keep it as clean as possible for next year.

Visit www.GetAsthmaHelp.org for more information about asthma events & trainings in your area.

MI ASTHMA CALENDAR

October

- 15 **How Asthma SMART Is Your Practice?** Health professional education, Prince Conference Center, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, 5:30 to 8:45 p.m. For more info: 616-732-8984
- 16 **Washtenaw Area Asthma Management Current Concepts & Resources**, Washtenaw Country Club, Ypsilanti Township, 6 to 9 p.m. For more info: 734-484-2989 ext. 205
- 23 **Tips & Tools for Asthma Care**, Health professional education, Northwestern Michigan College, Oleson Center, Traverse City, 5:15 to 8:00 p.m. For more info: 231-946-1344

November

- 14 **Asthma Information Review(AIR) course**, Washtenaw Intermediate School District building, Ann Arbor, 7:45 to 5:00 p.m. For more info: 734-677-6772

December

- 6-7 **Asthma Certification Prep Course**, Las Vegas Convention Center, Las Vegas, Nevada, For more info: www.aarc.org

