

A South African Worker's guide to Work-Related Asthma

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based on an original by
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For more information on asthma please visit
the National Asthma Education Programme
web site at: www.asthma.co.za
P.O. Box 72128, Parkview, 2122.
Tel: (011) 643 2755, Fax: 088 011 678 3069,
E-mail naepr@netactive.co.za.



Do you experience the following symptoms:

- Wheezing
- Chest tightness
- Breathlessness
- Coughing, with or without phlegm, especially late at night or early in the morning.
- Sometimes a runny or stuffy nose, watery or prickly eyes.

If yes, you could have ASTHMA, a disease which results in the narrowing of the airways in the lungs.

If your symptoms:

- Started only after you began working in a particular industry or section of your factory?
- Become worse during the working week, at work or after work?
- Are worse after work, or is your sleep disturbed during the night?
- Improve when you have been away from work for several days (for example when you are on holiday)?

Then ... you could have WORK-RELATED ASTHMA. There are two types of work related asthma:
OCCUPATIONAL ASTHMA - asthma caused by substances that are breathed in at work.

WORK-AGGRAVATED ASTHMA - pre-existing asthma which is made worse by the work environment.

During an asthma attack these symptoms get worse. Asthma symptoms can start soon after you begin work (early reactions), or many hours after leaving work (late reactions).

Sometimes you may get both early and late reactions.

What causes Occupational Asthma?

Occupational asthma is an **allergy or irritation** in the airways. You may work with substances that can cause allergies if you breathe them in. These are called **sensitisers**. Some of the common sensitisers are shown below, but there are many more.

Substance group	Common activities/workers at risk
Isocyanates	Spray painting; plastic and foam manufacturing
Flour / Grain and cereals	Handling grain; milling; malting; baking
Soldering fumes, Welding fumes	Soldering; electronic assembly welding
Animal fur, hair or feathers	Working with animals
Wood dusts	Sawmilling; woodwork
Anhydrides, glues or resins	Working with epoxy resin or methacrylate
Latex	Wearing latex rubber gloves, healthcare workers
Platinum salts	Refining platinum
Enzymes	Detergent users, pharmaceutical workers, bakers
Amines	Lacquer workers, soldering
Dyes	Textile workers
Formaldehyde, glutaraldehyde	Healthcare workers, x-ray processing
Metals	Soldering, metal refiners

- Not everyone who works with a sensitiser will get asthma.
- It can take from a few weeks to many years of working with a sensitiser to get asthma.
- Once you are sensitised, even breathing in very small amounts of the sensitiser can cause asthma symptoms or an asthma attack.

Some substances are irritants, and can cause asthma without sensitisation. Asthma symptoms can start after breathing in large amounts of irritant gas or fumes, such as in a chemical spill or gas leak. Some irritants that can be found in the workplace include:

- Chlorine
- Sulphur dioxide
- Fluorine

Aggravation of asthma that you may have had prior to starting work at a company can be caused by irritants or sensitisers.

Can work related asthma be prevented? YES:

Workers and employers must work together to:

- Remove any respiratory sensitisers in your workplace, control exposure to respiratory irritants or replace them with a safe alternative
- if this isn't possible, reduce the risk by installing extractor fans or protecting workers from the process that produces the risk through enclosure etc
- if removal, engineering or enclosure methods are not possible, then wearing breathing equipment will reduce inhaling the respiratory sensitiser.

Your employer has a legal duty to follow the above steps to protect the health of workers.

If your work is causing you to have any asthma symptoms.

- **Write down the names of the substances you work with** on the back of this leaflet. Show this to your doctor if you have breathing problems.
- **See a doctor immediately.** The longer

you wait, the more serious your condition will become.

- **Report** your symptoms to your employer and health and safety representative.
- **Know your rights.** If your work has caused your asthma, you are entitled to apply for compensation. A list of clinics which can help you with compensation is shown on the back of this leaflet, or ask your doctor.

5 Key points to remember:

- Occupational asthma is an allergy or irritation to something you breathe in at work.
- There are many substances in the workplace that can cause occupational asthma. Get to know the substances you work with.
- See a doctor immediately if you have any of the symptoms. Occupational asthma can affect you whole life if it is not dealt with as soon as possible.
- Occupational asthma can be prevented.
- Know about the causes, protect yourself and control exposures.

Having occupational asthma could affect your job and the rest of your life. Your employer must control hazards and you should try to prevent becoming sensitised in the first place.

Public Sector Occupational Medicine Clinics:

Kwazulu Natal	Occupational Medicine Clinic, King Edward Hospital	031 260 4471
Gauteng	Occupational Medicine Clinic, National Institute for Occupational Health	011 712 6420
Western Cape	WorkHealth Occupational Diseases Clinic, Groote Schuur Hospital	021 404 4369

National Compensation Offices	
Compensation Commissioner (Department of Labour)	012 319 9111
Compensation Commissioner (Miners) (Department of Health)	011 403 6322



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