

# Work-related Lung Disease

**W**e all feel like we're allergic to work sometimes, but some people really do get sick from their jobs.

If you're wheezing, coughing, and out of breath, but you seem to feel much better when you're away from your job, you may have a work-related lung disease such as asthma.

## Asthma types

Two forms of work-related asthma exist: work-aggravated and occupational. Work-aggravated asthma occurs when pre-existing asthma is triggered by workplace irritants.

Occupational asthma is new-onset asthma caused by agents in the workplace. It's the most prevalent work-related lung disease in developed countries.

Allergic sensitization and direct irritation are the two most common processes that induce occupational asthma. Allergic sensitization is when your body develops an allergy from long-term exposure to an agent. If you have asthma symptoms immediately after exposure to an irritant, it's probably direct irritant asthma.

Pesky co-workers aren't the only irritants in the workplace. More than 200 substances can endanger your lung health while you work including animal proteins, cereal grains, dyes, latex, metals, seafood, and formaldehyde.

## Testing

If your health care provider suspects you have work-related asthma, he will take an extensive medical history and ask you to describe your current and previous jobs. Tell your doctor if you're exposed to any of the known substances that cause work-related lung disease.

Spirometry is the primary diagnostic test for asthma. This 10- to 15-minute test measures reversible airflow limitation, an indication of how well you're breathing. Cross-shift spirometry performed before and after the work shift

can determine a temporal relationship between workplace exposure and symptoms.

You may be trained in peak flow measurement to find out whether or not you have occupational asthma. A peak flow meter is a small, portable device that measures how open your airways are. You'll be asked to perform a serial measurement of peak expiratory flow rate, which typically requires four measurements a day for at least two weeks.

## Avoiding exposure

The most effective way to treat work-related asthma is to get away from the substance that's causing the disease. Work-related lung disease can cause permanent lung damage, but this damage usually can be prevented if the employee leaves the environment within 12 months of initial exposure.

Occasionally, a product or substance can be substituted with something that doesn't cause an allergic reaction. For example, many health care workers develop latex allergies, so the asthmatic and his or her co-workers may be able to wear vinyl or synthetic

rubber gloves instead of latex.

Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) guidelines require your employer to notify you of hazardous chemicals in the workplace. If you're concerned about unsafe working conditions, contact OSHA at (800) 321-OSHA or [www.osha.gov](http://www.osha.gov).

Work-related lung disease puts your health and your job on the line. ■

*Editor's note: Information adapted from the Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, the California Department of Industrial Relations, and the American Lung Association.*

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## notes

Your doctor or therapist has given you this patient education handout to further explain or remind you about an issue related to your health. This handout is a general guide only. If you have specific questions, discuss them with your doctor or therapist.