

Breathe freely

A workers' information card on occupational asthma



This is a web-friendly version of leaflet INDG172(rev1), published 06/12

This card gives you practical information about occupational asthma. You may meet substances at work which could cause allergies if you breathe them in. Such substances are called respiratory sensitisers. They can quickly cause permanent damage to the nose, throat and lungs. If this happens, further exposure, sometimes to even minute quantities, may result in allergic symptoms such as:

- runny eyes and nose;
- itchy eyes and nose.

These may be followed by more severe symptoms typical of asthma such as:

- wheezing;
- tightness of chest;
- breathlessness;
- coughing.

Asthma attacks can be fatal.

Symptoms do not occur on first exposure to the substance. Most cases of sensitisation occur during the first two years of exposure, often in the first few months, but sometimes they appear only after decades of exposure. Symptoms are often most severe in the evening or during the night and you may not associate them with work. However, improvement in symptoms during weekends and holidays often points to an occupational cause.

REMEMBER! If you develop any of these symptoms which tend to improve when you are away from work, go and see your manager or health and safety representative and also your doctor.

What sort of substances cause these symptoms?

A wide variety of substances can cause these symptoms if you breathe them in. However you should be especially vigilant if you work with:

- isocyanates;
- flour/grain dust;
- glutaraldehyde;
- wood dusts;
- soldering flux;
- latex;
- laboratory animals;
- some glues, resins.

For further information see your health and safety representative.

REMEMBER! Always read the label

Do you work with these types of substances? Make a note of them and remember to tell your doctor if you visit about breathing problems.

What can you do?

Your employer is responsible for protecting you from exposure to these and other harmful substances but you also have a role to play. You can do this by:

- complying with all the health and safety precautions in your workplace;
- ensuring you use all the control measures provided;
- using, when necessary, all personal protective equipment (PPE) provided;
- storing your PPE when not in use so that they are not contaminated by the substances you work with;
- reporting any defects in the control measures and PPE to your employers;
- reporting to your manager, health and safety representative and your doctor if you develop the above symptoms if they tend to improve when you are away from work.

REMEMBER! If you develop occupational asthma you may have breathing difficulties all your life - avoid exposure and breathe freely!

Further information

For information about health and safety, or to report inconsistencies or inaccuracies in this guidance, visit www.hse.gov.uk/. You can view HSE guidance online and order priced publications from the website. HSE priced publications are also available from bookshops.

Asthma at Work Charter gives advice on how to make workplaces safer for people with asthma. Contact Asthma UK Tel: 0800 121 6244 Website: www.asthma.org.uk.

This leaflet contains notes on good practice which are not compulsory but which you may find helpful in considering what you need to do.

This leaflet is available in priced packs from HSE Books, ISBN 978 0 7176 6526 6. A web version can be found at www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg172.pdf.

© *Crown copyright* If you wish to reuse this information visit www.hse.gov.uk/copyright.htm for details. First published 06/12.