

Work-related asthma statistics in Great Britain, 2020

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Work-related Asthma

- Work-related asthma includes occupational asthma that is specifically caused by workplace exposures and work-aggravated asthma in which pre-existing cases are made worse by work.
- In 2019 there were an estimated 174 new cases of occupational asthma reported by doctors participating in the SWORD scheme. This is likely to be an underestimate of the true scale of occupational asthma.
- Statistical analyses that take account of the number of participating doctors suggest there was an increase in the rate of new cases per year over the last four years, and that the rate for the latest year is similar to that of 10 years ago.
- Each year there are an estimated 17,000 new cases of self-reported “breathing or lung problems” caused or made worse by work, according to the Labour Force Surveys over the last 3-years. A substantial proportion may be work-related asthma.
- The most common cited causes of occupational asthma by chest physicians continue to be isocyanates, and flour/grain.
- Occupations with the highest rates of new cases seen by chest physicians were 'vehicle paint technicians' and 'bakers and flour confectioners'.

The document can be found at: www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causdis/

Introduction

There is no universally accepted definition of "occupational asthma", though it is typically defined as new onset adult asthma caused by workplace exposures and not by factors outside the workplace.

"Work-aggravated asthma" typically refers to pre-existing cases made worse by non-specific factors in the workplace.

A more general description "work-related asthma" can be used to include all cases where there is some association between symptoms and work – i.e. it can refer to both occupational and work-aggravated asthma.

Many cases of occupational asthma are allergic in nature and typically involve a latency period between first exposure to a respiratory sensitiser in the workplace and the onset of symptoms. Asthma cases caused by irritants typically occur within a period of hours following exposure to high levels of an irritant gas, fume or vapour in the workplace.

Estimation of the overall scale of the disease, trends in incidence, and identification of high risk occupations and activities, relies on a variety of sources of data each with different strengths and weaknesses.

Overall scale of occupational asthma

In 2019, there were an estimated 174 new cases of occupational asthma reported by doctors participating in the SWORD scheme within The Health and Occupation Reporting (THOR) network (Figure 1B, dark red bars). Statistical analyses suggest an increase in the rate of new cases per year over recent years (Figure 1A). These figures are likely to be an underestimate of the true scale of occupational asthma.

Figure 1: Occupational asthma in Great Britain, 2009-2019

Figure 1A: Estimated rate of annual new cases reported by chest physicians relative to 2019 (SWORD)

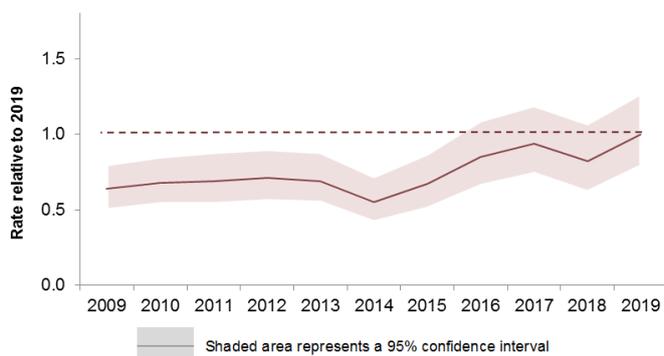
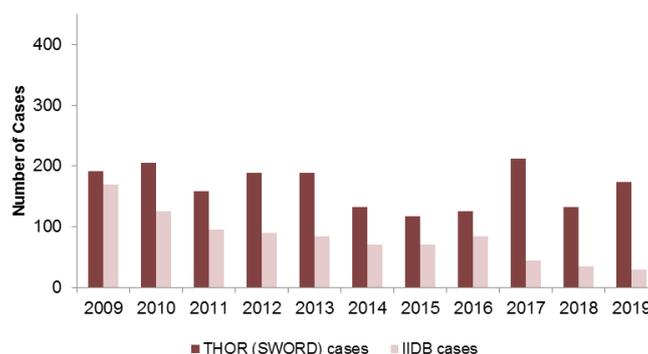


Figure 1B: Estimated number of cases reported by chest physicians (SWORD) and IIDB cases



Source: THOR (SWORD) scheme, University of Manchester

There were an estimated 17,000 (95% confidence interval: 12,000 – 23,000) new cases of self-reported "breathing or lung problems" each year caused or made worse by work according to the Labour Force Survey (LFS) over the last three years [Table-2 lfsilltyp www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/lfs/lfsilltyp.xlsx]. A substantial minority of these cases may be consistent with work-related asthma (see the Technical Notes).

In 2019, there were 30 new cases of occupational asthma assessed for Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit (IIDB) compared with 35 in 2018 and an average of 73 cases per year over the last decade of which around 20% were among women (see table IIDB01 www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/tables/iidb01.xlsx).

There is likely to be some overlap between the SWORD and IIDB occupational asthma cases. However, IIDB numbers tend to be lower than SWORD since the scheme may tend to pick up fewer cases arising from substances or in occupational settings where the link with asthma is less well established or well known. Furthermore, the self-employed are not covered by the IIDB scheme and the level of compensation available for even those who are severely disabled may not provide sufficient incentive for all eligible individuals to apply.

Reports to SWORD include only those cases of asthma that were serious enough to be seen by a chest physician. The majority, but not all, of eligible chest physicians are included in the scheme, and some of those who are included do not report any cases¹.

The THOR data (THORR02 – see www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/tables/thorr02.xlsx) suggest that occupational asthma affects workers of a wide range of: percentages of cases falling into the different age groups were 19% for 25-34 years, 20% for 35-44 years, 26% for 45-54 years and 24% for 55-64 years.

Trends in annual new cases

Data from SWORD can be used as the basis for inferences about time trends in the annual incidence of occupational asthma. However, such inferences cannot be made solely from the number of estimated annual cases since various factors can influence these numbers as well as true changes in incidence.

Relative changes in annual incidence based on the latest statistical modelling by the University of Manchester² takes account of some of these factors, including the number and type of participating specialists, their reporting habits, and seasonal effects associated with the time of year they report. This gives the best guide available to date about year-on-year changes (see Figure 1A).

The latest statistical modelling shows that:

- Current annual incidence is now higher than that seen around 10 years ago.
- The incidence has been increasing since 2014, although the estimated average increase over the longer period 2010-2019 of 2.5% per year (95% CI: -1.0% to 6.1%) was not statistically significant.
- Over the much longer period 1999-2019, there was a statistically significant downward trend in incidence, with an estimated average change of -5.3% per year (95% CI: -6.4% to -4.3%); but this estimate is driven by reductions that occurred more than 10 years ago.

These analyses do not take account of a possible tendency for reporters to include fewer cases than they should once they have been reporting for some time (so called "reporting fatigue"). Investigations to date into reporting fatigue within SWORD have found some evidence for it among "sample reporters" (those physicians that report into the scheme for one month of the year only) but little among "core reporters" (those that report every month).

There has been an average of 73 cases per year of IIDB cases of occupational asthma over the last 10 years. The numbers have declined from 125 cases in 2010 to 30 cases in 2019. Around 20% of cases were female.

The current list of agents for which benefit is payable within the IIDB scheme has remained constant for the period shown in Figure 1. The number of cases in the open category (which includes cases due to any other sensitising agent not specified in the other categories for which claimants have been able to demonstrate that this was the likely cause) has fallen recently: there were 5 cases in 2019 compared with 20 in 2010 (Table IIDB08 www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/tables/iidb08.xlsx).

Causal agents for occupational asthma

Figures 2 and 3 show the most commonly cited agents for cases of occupational asthma in the SWORD and IIDB schemes during the last two five-year periods (used since numbers are small for individual years).

Figures for SWORD and the IIDB scheme both continue to show isocyanates and flour/grain as the agents responsible for the highest proportion of new cases of occupational asthma, followed by wood dusts. Cleaning products are also a common cause of SWORD cases.

Previously, the role of isocyanates and flour/grain in occupational asthma was also supported by more detailed questioning about the causes of work-related illness included in the LFS for 2009/10, 2010/11, and 2011/12. Based on data from these surveys, of those with self-reported breathing and lung problems:

- approximately 13% thought that "Airborne materials from spray painting or manufacturing foam product" had contributed to their ill health;
- a further 7% cited "Dusts from flour or grain/cereal, animal feed or bedding (straw)"; and,
- a further 10% thought that "Airborne materials while welding, soldering or cutting/grinding metals" had contributed to their ill health.

Tables THORR06 (www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/tables/thorr06.xlsx) and IIDB08 (www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/tables/iidb08.xlsx) show a full breakdown of the THOR and IIDB cases by agent.

Figure 2: Most common agents for occupational asthma (SWORD 2010-14 & 2015-19)

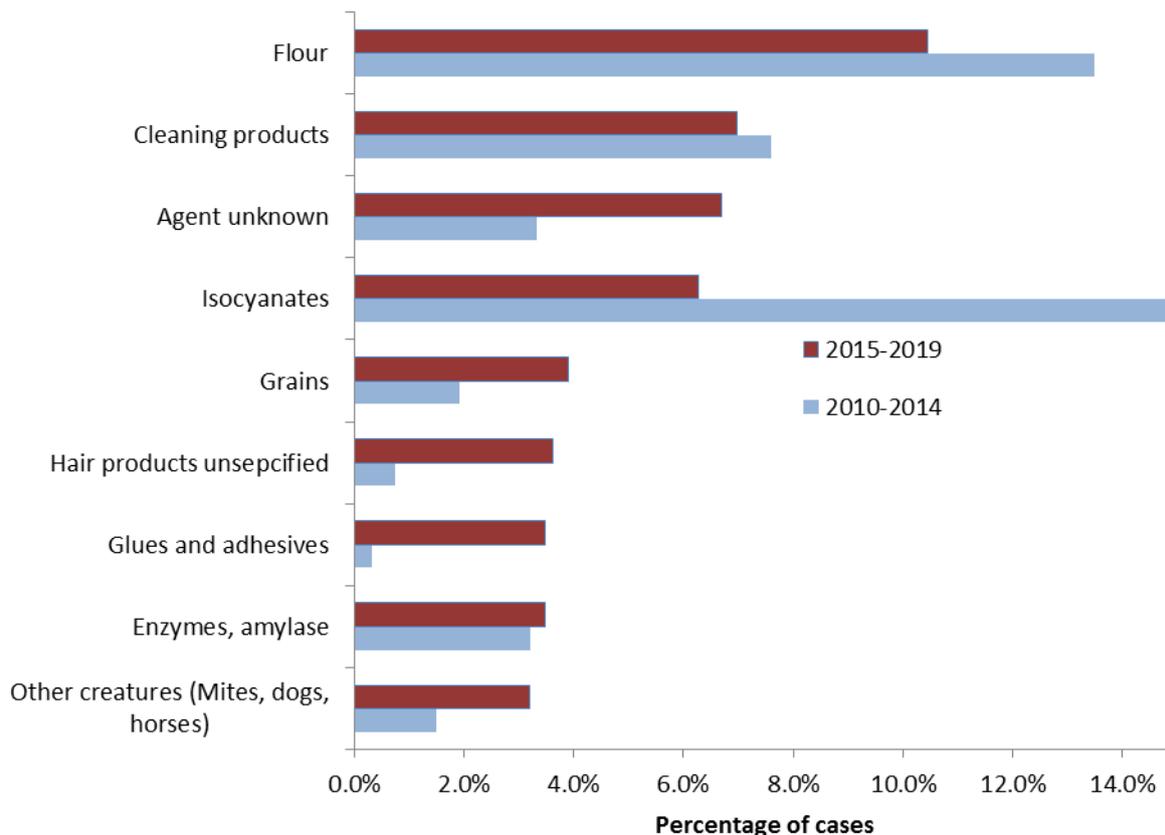
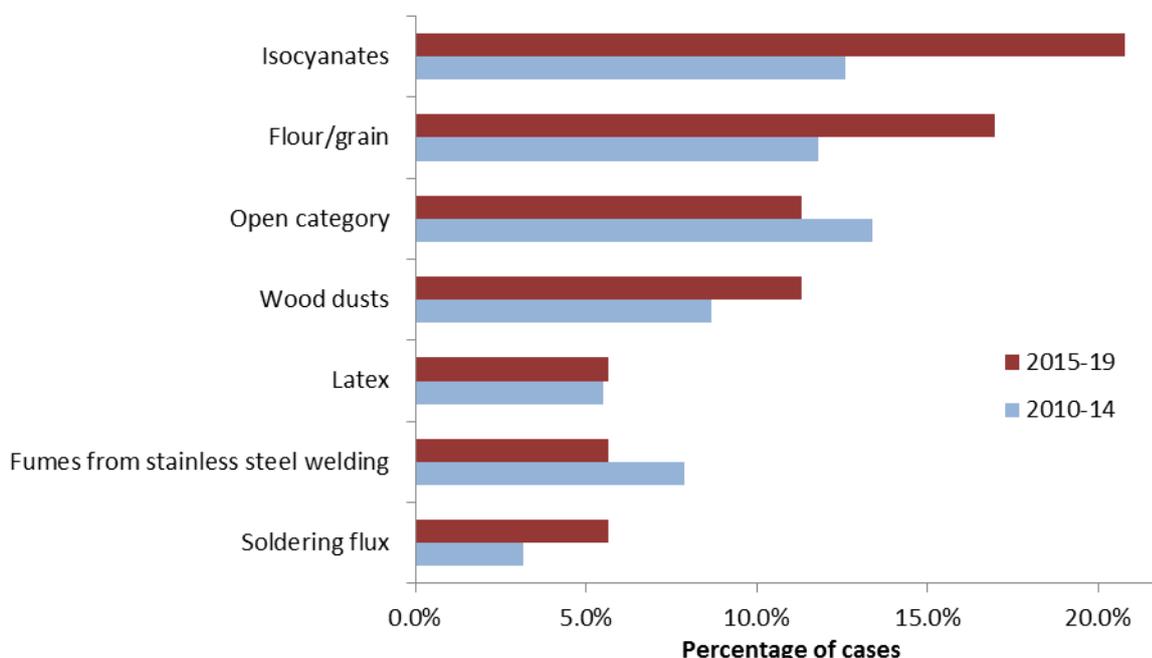


Figure 3: Most common agents for occupational asthma (IIDB 2010-14 & 2015-19)



Detailed analyses of the SWORD data have provided evidence of reductions in incidence due to certain specific agents. For example, there is evidence of a decline in occupational asthma due to both glutaraldehyde and latex, which have more reported cases in the healthcare sector than elsewhere. These declines are likely to be associated with the elimination of glutaraldehyde-based disinfectant use and interventions to reduce exposure to latex³.

Occupation and industry

Industrial and occupational analyses of SWORD cases can also give some insight into the types of workplaces and activities that are currently causing occupational asthma in the British workforce.

Tables THORR04 (www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/tables/thorr04.xlsx) and THORR05 (www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/tables/thorr05.xlsx) show the average number of SWORD cases reported per year during the period 2017-2019, by occupation and industry respectively, together with estimated rates per 100,000 workers. The overall occupational asthma incidence (across all occupations or all industries) was 0.53 cases per 100,000 workers per year during the period.

Occupation

Table THORR04 shows occupational asthma cases in SWORD by occupation.

Two major groups of the Standard Occupation Classification have rates greater than the average for all occupations:

- 'Process, Plant and Machine Operatives' (2.1 per 100,000) and
- 'Skilled Trades Occupations' (1.8 per 100,000).

For comparisons of more detailed occupation unit groups pooling of data over a larger number of years is necessary. Based on SWORD data for 2010-2019, highest rates were seen in the following occupations:

- 'Vehicle paint technicians' (42.4 per 100,000), and
- 'Bakers and flour confectioners' (35.5 per 100,000).

These occupations have consistently had among the highest rates of occupational asthma based on SWORD reporting.

Caution is required in drawing conclusions about trends for individual occupations over time. The earlier comments relating to trends in the overall rate of asthma apply, and in addition, particular outbreaks of occupational asthma in certain industries – for example, in relation to metal working fluids – will also have a large impact on figures at this level.

Industry

Table THORR05 shows that during 2017-2019 the manufacturing industry as a whole had a substantially higher rate (2.8 per 100,000 workers) than the average for all industries.

More detailed industry divisions with the highest rates of occupational asthma as seen by chest physicians (where numbers were large enough to provide reliable estimates) were:

- 'Other manufacturing' (10.6 per 100,000),
- 'Manufacture of food products' (10.1 per 100,000).

Over the longer period 2010-2019, the divisions with the highest rates were:

- 'Other manufacturing' (7.3 per 100,000),
- 'Manufacture of food products' (6.9 per 100,000),
- 'Manufacture of motor vehicles, trailers and semi-trailers' (6.1 per 100,000),
- 'Manufacture of chemicals and chemical products' (4.1 per 100,000), and
- 'Manufacture of basic metals' (4.0 per 100,000).

Again, particular outbreaks of occupational asthma will also have a large impact on figures at this level.

Rates by occupation and industry are calculated by using a denominator based on the number of workers identified in the Labour Force Survey in the relevant occupational or industrial sector. Thus, the denominator is representative of the whole sector whereas the number of cases reported is limited by underreporting (see above). As a consequence, the rates identified should be seen as minimal estimates. Numbers and rates for each major occupational group and industrial sector are shown, and where the number of actual cases over a three-year period is greater than or equal to 10, case numbers and rates are shown for the unit group for occupations, and divisions for industry.

Caution must be applied when interpreting the rates at the occupational unit group and industry division level of detail, as there may be occupations and industries that are relatively small; therefore, the actual rates of disease incidence may be high, but they are not included in SWORD tables because the number of cases is below the inclusion threshold.

Technical notes

Disease definition

Individuals with asthma have chronic inflammation in the bronchi (air passages). As a consequence, the bronchial walls swell causing the bronchi to narrow, which can lead to breathlessness. Muscles around the air passages also become irritable so that they contract, causing sudden worsening of symptoms in response to various stimuli, including exposures encountered at work. The inflammation can also make mucus glands in the bronchi produce excessive sputum which further blocks up already narrowed air passages. If the inflammation is not controlled with treatment, as well as causing acute attacks, it can lead to permanent narrowing and scarring of the air passages.

There is no universally accepted definition of "occupational asthma". It can be defined as adult asthma caused by workplace exposures and not by factors outside the workplace. A more general description "work-related asthma" can be used to include all cases where there is some association between symptoms and work – i.e. it can refer to both occupational asthma and "work-aggravated asthma" (i.e. pre-existing or coincidental new onset adult asthma which is made worse by non-specific factors in the workplace).

Asthma caused by specific work factors is of two broad types: "allergic occupational asthma" and "irritant-induced occupational asthma". The former accounts for the majority of cases and typically involves a latency period between first exposure to the specific cause (the "respiratory sensitiser") in the workplace and the onset of symptoms. The latter typically occurs within a period of hours following exposure to high levels of an irritant gas, fume or vapour in the workplace.

The causal mechanisms for occupational asthma vary from one substance to another. Because the range of industries which use substances with the potential to cause asthma is quite broad, and not all employees in these industries will necessarily be exposed, it is difficult to estimate with any confidence the total number of workers at risk. Estimation of the overall scale of the disease, trends in incidence, and identification of high risk occupations and activities, relies on a variety of sources of data each with different strengths and weaknesses.

Data sources

A number of data sources provide information about the incidence of work-related and occupational asthma in Great Britain – i.e. the number of newly diagnosed cases each year. Information about cases of occupational asthma referred to consultant chest physicians is available from the Surveillance of Work-related and Occupational Respiratory Disease (SWORD) scheme within The Health and Occupation Reporting (THOR) network. Information about newly assessed cases for Industrial Injuries and Disablement Benefit (IIDB) is available from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Although these sources record a substantial number of actual cases occurring each year, they both underestimate the overall incidence of occupational asthma and substantially underestimate the incidence of work-related asthma.

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) provides estimates of all work-related respiratory disease, and while a substantial proportion of this is likely to be work-related asthma, actual estimates are not available.

Relatively few actual cases of asthma are reported each year within the THOR-GP scheme meaning that estimates of the scale of GP reported occupational or work-related asthma are imprecise.

Information about the overall scale of disease is also available based on attributable fractions from epidemiological studies.

Evidence about the overall scale of work-related and occupational asthma

Given that a substantial proportion of the annual incidence of work-related respiratory disease as estimated by the LFS is likely to be asthma, this suggests that the annual incidence of work-related asthma may be substantially higher – perhaps an order of magnitude higher – than the incidence of occupational asthma suggested by the SWORD and IIDB schemes.

Information about the overall scale of disease is also available based on attributable fractions from epidemiological studies.

An investigation of THOR-GP data from 2006-2012 indicated that about 30% of the total number of respiratory disease cases were asthma, and of these, about half were reported as aggravated by work and a further third (i.e. about 10% of the total) were reported as being caused by a particular workplace agent – and therefore may be broadly consistent with the definition of occupational asthma. If 10% of annual new cases of self-reported work-related breathing and lung problems were in fact occupational asthma, the implied annual incidence would be around an order of magnitude higher than estimated by SWORD.

Estimates of the proportion of cases of asthma attributed to workplace exposures from epidemiological studies suggest that the incidence of work-related asthma may be higher still. For example, a recent European population-based study estimated the incidence of work-related asthma (including irritant-induced occupational asthma) to be 25 to 30 cases per 100,000 people per year⁴ (equivalent to 7500 to 9000 new cases per year). Other studies have estimated that occupational factors account for approximately 9-15% of asthma cases in adults of working age⁵. Applying these latter proportions to the estimated incidence of adult asthma in developed countries⁶ would imply rates of work-related asthma in Great Britain even higher than based on the European study.

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