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PATIENT UPDATE: Your Job May Trigger Asthma & Allergies



What you do on a daily basis to earn a living could initiate allergic disease. Occupational asthma, defined as a lung disorder caused by inhaling fumes, gases, dust or other potentially harmful substance while “on the job,” is the most prevalent work-related disease in developed countries. In fact, it is estimated that up to 15% of asthma cases in adults may have job-related factors. Occupational asthma also accounts for approximately 24.5 million missed work days for adults annually in the United States.

What Are The Signs of Occupational Asthma?

Symptoms of occupational asthma include:

- Wheezing
- Shortness of breath
- Chest tightness
- Cough
- Runny nose or nasal congestion
- Eye irritation

The disease may last for a lengthy period of time in workers, even if they are no longer exposed to the agents. Symptoms will usually worsen through the work week, improve on the weekend and reappear when an employee returns to the job. The length of occupational exposure that triggers asthma can range from months to years before symptoms occur. Occasionally, an accident at work involving high exposure to irritating fumes or dusts may cause asthma within 24 hours. Early recognition and control of triggers are important in occupational-induced asthma because the longer employees are exposed, the less likely it is that they will completely overcome their asthma symptoms.

Who Is At Risk?

With occupational asthma, symptoms of asthma may develop for the first time in a previously healthy worker, or childhood asthma that had previously cleared may recur due to new exposure. In many cases, a previous personal or family history of allergies will make a person more likely to develop occupational asthma. However, many individuals who have no such history still will develop asthma if exposed to conditions that trigger it. The incidence of occupational asthma varies by industry. For example, in the detergent industry, inhalation of a particular enzyme used to produce washing powders has led to the development of respiratory symptoms in 25% of exposed employees. Approximately 5% of people working with powdered natural rubber latex gloves have developed occupational asthma. Chemicals widely used in many industries, including spray painting, insulation installation, and in manufacturing plastics, rubber and foam, can cause asthma in up to 10% of exposed workers. Other workers who are at risk for occupational asthma include:

- Adhesive Handlers
- Beauticians and Hairdressers
- Janitors
- Textile Workers
- Carpet Makers
- Health Care Professionals

How Can Occupational Asthma Be Prevented?

Once the cause of occupational asthma is identified, exposure to the triggers should be reduced. Work areas should be closely monitored so exposure to asthma-causing substance is kept to a minimum. In some cases, pre-treatment with specific medications to counteract the effects of workplace substance may be helpful. In other situations, however, complete avoidance is necessary. Reducing exposure to occupational asthma triggers, receiving appropriate treatment and practicing careful avoidance measures will improve your quality of life and help you feel relief from symptoms.

