

ASTHMA IN THE WORKPLACE

WHAT CAN YOU OR YOUR EMPLOYER DO IF YOU ARE NOT SURE IF THERE IS A PROBLEM AT WORK?

The Occupational Safety and Health Service of the Department of Labour (OSH) can be contacted under "L" (Labour, Department of) in the telephone book for advice.

They have the resources to provide information and advice about workplace hazards and the best (and most practicable) means of controlling these problems if they exist.

Your union may also be able to offer help.

YOUR LOCAL ASTHMA SOCIETY CAN ALSO HELP



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Helping New Zealanders breathe easier
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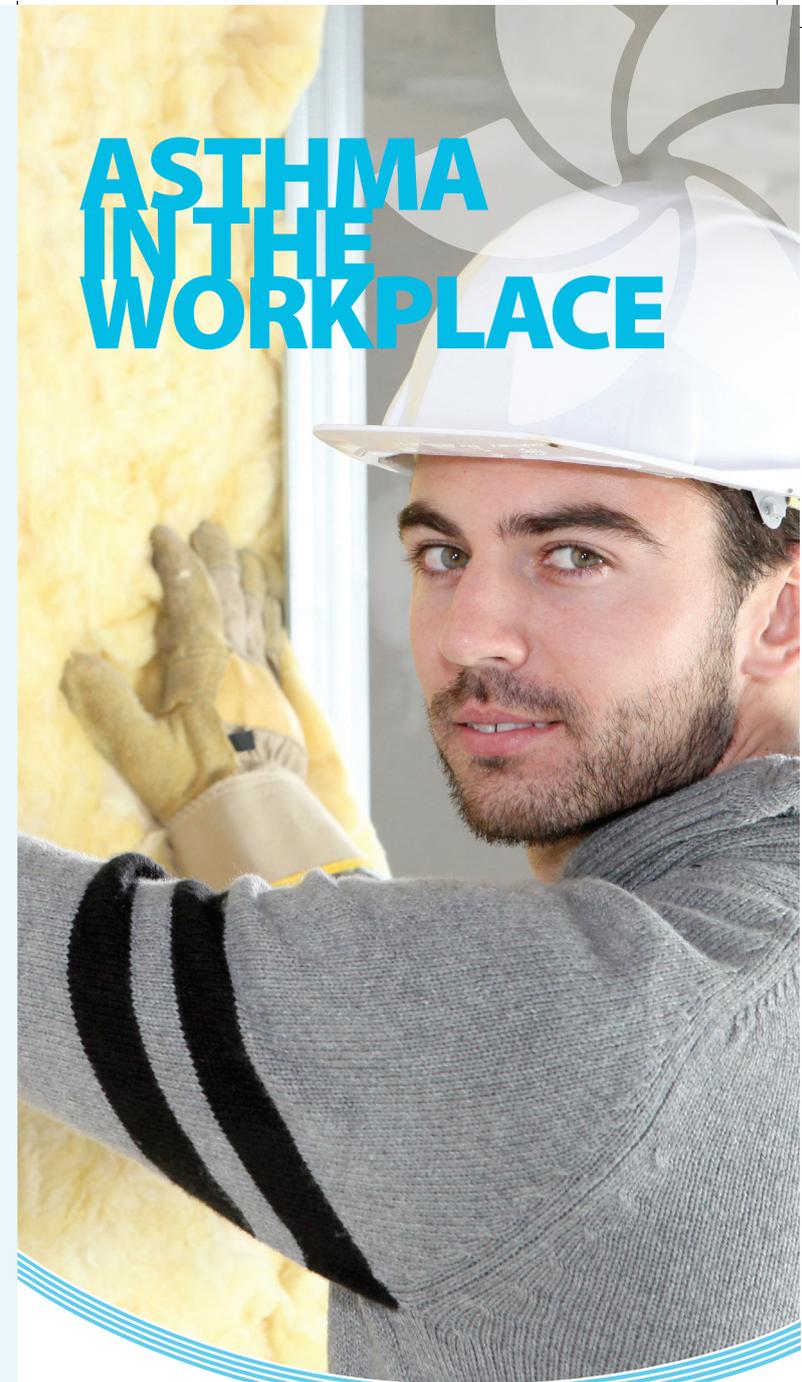
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The Asthma Foundation is New Zealand's not for profit
sector authority on asthma and other respiratory illnesses.

We advocate to government, fund research for better
treatments and educate on best practice.

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the asthma foundation
Better respiratory health for New Zealanders



IS YOUR WORKPLACE MAKING YOUR ASTHMA WORSE?

Asthma can be triggered by many things both at work and away from work, including:

- Smoking or being exposed to someone else's smoke
- Dusts
- Fumes
- Allergens (from dust mites, animals, etc.)
- Physical exertion
- Stress
- Cold air

Symptoms include:

- Cough (either a dry cough or one that produces mucus). Often people whose asthma is caused by work or whose asthma is made worse by work will notice the cough predominantly at night
- Shortness of breath or chest tightness
- Wheezing

If symptoms tend to arise closely after exposure, the person will often be very aware of the substance or area of the worksite which makes their problem worse. All of these symptoms may improve when the person isn't at work.

ARE YOU AT RISK OF DEVELOPING ASTHMA AT WORK?

Sometimes, people who have never had asthma before can develop asthma through an allergic reaction to a substance in the workplace. This may happen even after years of working safely with the substance. Sometimes the allergic reaction (and therefore the symptoms) doesn't develop until some hours after the exposure. It is therefore often difficult to identify the workplace as the cause.

Other people develop asthma for the first time in the workplace after heavy exposure to irritants of the breathing tubes, such as welding fumes or gaseous vapours like sulphur dioxide.

In New Zealand many substances or processes are recognised as causing asthma problems. The more common exposures include:

- Working with chemicals such as those used in some paints and glues, foam manufacture etc, or epoxy resins. Common industries include spray painting and boat building.
- Working with wood dusts. Problem dusts include western red cedar, rimu and some particle boards (building and joinery industries)
- Being exposed to metal fumes or dusts (aluminium smelting, welding, etc.)
- Being exposed to dusts from organic sources such as flour, animals, insects etc.

The prevalence of occupational asthma is higher in smokers.

WHAT CAN YOU DO IF YOU SUSPECT SOMETHING AT WORK IS CAUSING YOU TO DEVELOP ASTHMA OR IS MAKING YOUR ASTHMA WORSE?

Talk about the problem with your doctor or the occupational health nurse if one visits your workplace. The doctor will ask you to:

- note what substances or processes you are exposed to in your work
- note if your symptoms worsen during each shift or over a roster period
- note if there is any improvement away from work.
- teach you how to measure and record a peak flow measurement.

This measures how fast you can breathe out and tells you how wide your breathing tubes are.

It is best done four times a day for a two-week period.

This period should cover time at work and time away from work.

If a workplace process or substance is causing or making your asthma worse, there are several steps that you can explore with your employer to lessen the problem. They are:

Elimination

Can the substance or process be changed for something less harmful?

For example, one electronics firm eliminated soldering by riveting components to circuit boards.

Isolation

Can the substance or process be isolated to a special place in the worksite or time of day when most people will not be exposed? A manufacturer restricts its production of playground rubber mats to a period at the end of the day when most of the staff are off work. By the time the staff return the next day the fumes have gone.

Minimisation

Can the equipment be improved to reduce the exposure?

A joinery factory improved its ventilation and extraction equipment to reduce dust levels. This is always a better method than relying on masks for protection.