

# Safety Alert

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## Allergies in the Workplace

Millions of people suffer from allergies caused by every day exposures to agents such as dust mites, cat dander, and pollens. Agents encountered by workers can also cause allergic problems such as asthma, nasal and sinus allergies, hives, and even severe anaphylactic reactions.

Examples of these agents include animal proteins, enzymes, flour, natural rubber latex, and certain reactive chemicals. Asthma is one of the more serious problems that can be caused by an allergy. It can cause recurrent attacks of symptoms such as wheezing, chest tightness, shortness of breath, and coughing. In severe cases, these symptoms can be disabling. Fortunately, when potential hazards are recognized, allergies and asthma can often be prevented or their effects minimized.

That's where you come in. Understanding what "triggers" an allergic attack can be the preventive measure. Knowing that many of your co-workers may suffer from various allergies from time to time is important. Taking steps to avoid placing them in a position that would initiate an allergic condition is the smart thing to do. Here are some facts about allergies and what can trigger an attack.

### Fragrance Sensitivity

For many employees, being exposed to perfumes and chemicals in the workplace can pose a serious health risk. Migraines, nausea and tightening of the throat are common symptoms and people with asthma who are affected by fragrances can suffer respiratory impairment. In addition, people are becoming increasingly sensitive to perfume, cologne and scented hand lotion. However, the sensitivity to fragrances can extend to hair products, candles, potpourri, air fresheners and cleaning supplies used in the workplace.

Today's modern fragrances are nothing like the essences once distilled simply from flowers. They generally are developed from petrochemicals. Increasingly greater numbers of people are finding that fragrances in the workplace are causes of allergies.

### Occupational Asthma

Asthma is a chronic (long-term, ongoing) inflammation of the breathing passages (bronchi) of the lungs. The inflammation irritates the airway, causing breathing problems.

- Most people with asthma have sudden attacks or periods of bothersome or severe symptoms separated by periods of mild symptoms or no symptoms at all.
- Asthma is an inflammatory reaction that is triggered by external factors or specific situations.
- When a person with asthma is exposed to one of his or her triggers, the inflammation worsens and symptoms ensue.

Occupational asthma is a breathing (respiratory) disease caused by exposure to a trigger in the workplace. The trigger generally is something inhaled. Once the attack is triggered, the airways begin to swell and tighten (bronchospasm) and secrete large amounts of mucus.

- The swelling and extra mucus partially block, or obstruct, the airways. This makes it more difficult to push air out of your lungs (exhale).
- Because of this, asthma is referred to as a chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), like emphysema and chronic bronchitis.

### **Allergic Control Measures**

Early recognition and avoidance of the trigger is particularly important in occupational asthma. Because people spend so much time at work, they tend to have extensive exposure to their trigger by the time the cause of the symptoms is recognized as asthma. The more time a person with asthma is exposed to their trigger, the more likely they are to have permanent lung inflammation and airway hypersensitivity.

To help control situations that "trigger" allergic attacks we ask each employee to:

- Avoid bringing products into the office buildings that could release harmful or bothersome odors or contaminants.
- Refrain from applying spray colognes, hair sprays, and air fresheners in office areas.

Please help to accommodate our co-workers and visitors who are chemically sensitive to fragrances and other scented products.