

FRAGRANCES AND WORK-RELATED ASTHMA: INFORMATION FOR EMPLOYERS

Perfumes and fragrances used in personal care products, cleaning products, and air fresheners in the workplace can cause or trigger asthma. They contain many different chemicals, including several known to cause asthma, even in people who have never had asthma before.

WHAT IS WORK-RELATED ASTHMA?

Asthma is a chronic lung disease where the flow of air is decreased, making it hard to breathe. Asthma is work-related when it is caused or made worse by something at work. Symptoms can start right after an employee breathes in a substance, or hours after leaving work. Sometimes a person can suddenly develop work-related asthma from substances they have worked around for years. An employee experiencing wheezing, chest tightness, cough, shortness of breath, or difficulty breathing, should be seen by a doctor. The employee should tell the doctor if exposures at work seem to increase or cause the symptoms. Work-related asthma can be serious. The earlier the exposure is stopped, the more the person's asthma can improve.



Office worker using air refreshener at her desk.

CASE REPORT

Use of air freshener sent a fellow employee to the emergency room

A 25-year-old woman with asthma worked at a child care center doing data entry. Her workplace had meetings about not spraying chemicals in the office, but did not have a written fragrance-free policy. A co-worker sprayed air freshener in the office. The data entry clerk immediately began having severe asthma symptoms and had to go to the emergency room. She also had to take oral steroids to control her asthma. The data entry clerk reported that other co-workers had asthma symptoms as a result of air freshener use.

A security guard had to leave his job because of fragrance use

A 50-year-old man with asthma worked as a security guard for 9 years. Whenever anyone at work was wearing strong cologne or used a product with fragrance, it triggered his asthma. He didn't want to tell people not to wear scented products, and his asthma just kept getting worse. A fellow employee got scented lotion on the guard's jacket, which worsened his asthma symptoms and gave him hives. He went to the emergency room 6 times before he finally had to leave his job.

