

CLEANING PRODUCTS AND WORK-RELATED ASTHMA: INFORMATION FOR WORKERS

Cleaning products are used in almost all workplaces. These products can cause asthma or make it worse. This fact sheet talks about safer products and ways to clean at work. Use this information to help you stay safe from asthma at work, and share it with your employer.

WHAT IS ASTHMA?

Asthma is a lung disease. People who have asthma sometimes have a hard time breathing. They may have wheezing, chest tightness, and cough. It is important to avoid getting asthma because once you have it, you can have asthma for the rest of your life.

WHEN IS ASTHMA WORK-RELATED?

Asthma that is caused or made worse by chemicals or other substances at work is called “work-related asthma.” You may get asthma symptoms right after you breathe in the substance or you may feel symptoms hours after leaving work. Cleaning products can cause work-related asthma. For example, your asthma can get worse when you walk into a room that has just been cleaned. You can work with cleaning products for years without a problem and then get asthma.

WORK-RELATED ASTHMA IN CALIFORNIA

The Work-Related Asthma Prevention Program (WRAPP) helps workers avoid getting asthma from their job. WRAPP has found that one out of nine workers who got asthma on the job linked their asthma to cleaning products. Some were custodians



who used the cleaning products themselves. Most of the workers got asthma just from being around cleaning products and breathing them in while at work. Most of the workers never had asthma until they breathed in cleaning products. The products most likely caused their asthma.

Work-related asthma can be dangerous. If you have breathing problems, the sooner you stop using chemicals that can cause asthma or make it worse, the more likely your breathing problems will get better.

CASE REPORTS

A 37-year-old teacher got asthma from cleaning products used incorrectly

The people who cleaned the teacher’s school used cleaning products that needed to be mixed with water. Instead, they used the products without mixing them with water. The teacher never had problems with her breathing before. She now takes five different asthma medicines because she got asthma from her job. She worked there for only three years.

A 43-year-old high school custodian had to leave his job because of asthma

The custodian was having breathing problems at work. He used chemicals to clean the bathroom and strip floor wax. When he was away from the chemicals for a few months, his breathing problems got better. The problems came back when he returned to work. It took a long time for doctors to figure out what was wrong with him. A doctor finally told him he had asthma. About a year later, he left his job because of his breathing problems.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I THINK I HAVE WORK-RELATED ASTHMA?

See a doctor if you are wheezing, coughing, have a tight chest, or trouble breathing. If you think something at work is causing your asthma or making it worse, let your supervisor know. Your supervisor may send you to see a doctor who treats work-related health problems. Before you go to the doctor, write down the names of products used at work. If you can, ask your supervisor for the information that comes with chemical products, called a Safety Data Sheet (SDS). The SDS lists what is in the product and how it can affect health. Show these to the doctor and tell the doctor when you started having breathing problems.

HOW CAN ASTHMA FROM CLEANING PRODUCTS BE PREVENTED?

1. Use safer products

- Talk to your employer about buying safer products. Products labeled “Green Seal certified” or “UL EcoLogo certified” are safer choices. They have safer chemicals in them that do not cause asthma.

2. Use safer work methods

- Never mix different cleaning products together.
- Only disinfect areas that need it so you use less disinfectant.
- Mix the cleaner with the correct amount of water if the instructions say to add water.
- Work with as much fresh air as possible. Open windows and doors if needed.
- Avoid using spray products. Instead, pour cleaner (mixed with water if needed) onto a cloth to wipe surfaces. If possible, use microfiber cloths since they clean better than regular cloths.
- Use goggles, gloves and other equipment to protect yourself. Wear a respirator if your employer says you should. CAUTION: dust masks will NOT keep most cleaning chemicals from getting into your lungs.
- Read product warning labels, the SDS, and directions for safe storage and disposal.

For more information, call the Work-Related Asthma Prevention Program in California: 1-800-970-6680 or the [Work-Related Asthma Prevention Program website](http://tinyurl.com/CAWorkRelatedAsthma) (<http://tinyurl.com/CAWorkRelatedAsthma>). CA Relay Service: 711. To get a copy of this fact sheet in another format, please call us at (510) 620-5757. Allow at least 10 days.



Photo: Custodian using a microfiber mop

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Buy safer cleaning chemicals: [Green Seal-certified products and services website](http://www.greenseal.org/FindGreenSealProductsAndServices.aspx) (<http://www.greenseal.org/FindGreenSealProductsAndServices.aspx>). Look for GS-37, GS-52 and GS-53 Green Seal certified products

[UL website](https://spot.ulprospector.com/en/na/BuiltEnvironment) (<https://spot.ulprospector.com/en/na/BuiltEnvironment>). Search for UL 2759 certified products in the top left hand corner.

Safer cleaning and disinfecting fact sheets and guidelines: [Informed Green Solutions website](http://www.informedgreensolutions.org) (www.informedgreensolutions.org).