

Fragrances and Work-Related Asthma: Information for Workers

Perfumes and fragrances used in personal care products, cleaning products, and air fresheners can cause or trigger asthma. Some of these products can lead to asthma in people who never had it before.

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.



Office worker using air freshener at her desk.

What is work-related asthma?

Asthma that is caused or made worse by chemicals or substances at work is called “work-related asthma.” You may get asthma symptoms right after you breathe in a substance. Or, you may feel symptoms hours after leaving work. Sometimes people can work around a substance for many years with no problems. They can later become sensitized, or allergic, to the substance and get new asthma. The earlier a person stops being around the substance, the more the person’s asthma can improve.

What should I do if I think I have work-related asthma?

See a doctor if you are wheezing, coughing, or have a tight chest or trouble breathing. If you think fragrances, air fresheners, or other substances at work are causing your asthma or making it worse, tell your supervisor. He or she may send you to see a doctor who treats work-related health problems. Tell the doctor what it is at work that causes or adds to your asthma symptoms.

Worker Story: Use of air freshener sent a worker to the emergency room

A 25-year-old woman with asthma worked at a childcare center doing data entry. Her work had held meetings about not spraying products in the office. They did not have a written policy on fragrances. A co-worker sprayed air freshener in the office. The data entry clerk right away began having severe asthma symptoms. She had to go to the emergency room. She also had to use more medicine to help her asthma. The data entry clerk said that her co-workers also had asthma symptoms from the air freshener use.

Worker Story: A security guard had to quit his job because of fragrances

A 50-year-old man with asthma worked as a security guard for 9 years. He had asthma symptoms when people at work wore strong perfume or used a product with fragrance. He didn’t want to tell people not to wear scented products. His asthma kept getting worse. A fellow worker got scented lotion on the guard’s jacket, which gave him asthma symptoms and hives. He went to the emergency room 6 times before he finally had to leave his job.

Air Fresheners - A temporary fix for bad smells

Air fresheners and deodorizers are used as plug-ins, sprays, liquids, and gels. They cover up bad smells but do not get rid of them. These products can cause asthma and other health problems such as headaches and allergies. It is better to find and fix the source of a smell rather than use an air freshener to cover it up. This can include fixing water leaks to stop mold from growing. It can also include cleaning or changing a musty carpet to get rid of odors.

Work-related asthma in California

The Work-Related Asthma Prevention Program (WRAPP) tracks information about California workers with asthma. The program helps workers avoid getting asthma from their jobs. WRAPP has found over 250 asthma cases from fragrances at work. This includes many indoor work settings like schools, hospitals, offices, and manufacturing.

What can my workplace do to prevent asthma from perfumes and fragrances?

- Train employees about the health effects of fragrances.
- Have a fragrance-free policy. A link to a model policy that can be customized for your workplace is found in the "Additional Resources" section below.
- Prohibit the use of air fresheners in the workplace.
- Fix or remove what is causing bad odors.
- Choose fragrance-free cleaning products.
- Bring in adequate fresh air from the outside.



Woman spraying fragrance on wrist.

Personal Care Products –

Fragrance is found in more than just perfume and cologne. Products with scents include body sprays, aftershave, lotion, hair products, deodorants, soaps, and similar products. Some products come in an unscented version.

For more information, call the **Work-Related Asthma Prevention Program** in California: **1-800-970-6680** (toll-free to California callers) or go to www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/ohsep/Pages/Asthma.aspx. California Relay Service: 711. To get a copy of this fact sheet in another format, please call (510) 620-5757. Allow at least 10 days.

Additional Resources

Model Fragrance-Free Workplace Policy: http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/ohsep/Documents/Model_Fragrance_Free_Policy.docx

New York State's Green Cleaning Program keeps a list of asthma-safer cleaning products without fragrance: <https://greencleaning.ny.gov/Product/Default.aspx> (Under Product Category, choose "cleaning products." Click the "No" button next to the "Prefer products with fragrance" question)

The U.S. EPA's Safer Choice Fragrance-Free label is used on some cleaning products: <http://www2.epa.gov/saferchoice>

This Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety web page includes steps for implementing a fragrance-free policy in the workplace: http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/scent_free.html