

Fragrances and Work-Related Asthma: Information for Employers



Office worker using air freshener at her desk.

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.

Work-related asthma in California

The Work-Related Asthma Prevention Program (WRAPP) tracks information about California workers with asthma and helps workers avoid getting asthma from their jobs. WRAPP has found over 250 work-related asthma cases from fragrance exposures in many indoor work settings – including schools, hospitals, offices, and manufacturing.

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.

Case Report - 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.

Air Fresheners - A temporary solution for bad smells

Air fresheners and deodorizers come in many forms: plug-ins, sprays, liquids, and gels. These products mask bad odors rather than get rid of them. Air fresheners add chemicals to the air that 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. For example, repairing water leaks to stop the growth of mildew or replacing a musty carpet will get rid of odors.

As an employer, what can I do to prevent asthma from perfumes and fragrances?

- Educate employees about the health effects of fragrances.
- Implement and enforce fragrance-free policies in your school, office, or other workplace. A link to a customizable model policy is found in the "Additional Resources" section below.
- Do not use or allow air fresheners in the workplace. Fix or remove what is causing bad odors.
- Choose fragrance-free cleaning products.
- Optimize building ventilation to bring in adequate fresh air.



Woman spraying fragrance on wrist.

Personal Care Products – Fragrance is found in more than just perfume and cologne. Scented products can 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