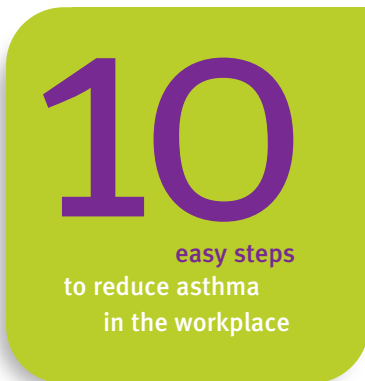




Asthma at Work – Your Charter

***Asthma at Work – Your Charter* is supported by a coalition of employers, employees and healthcare professionals. In it Asthma UK sets out ten steps to significantly reduce the impact of asthma in the workplace.**



- 1 Nobody should have to breathe second-hand smoke at work.
- 2 Employees should enjoy reasonable protection from asthma triggers at work.
- 3 Employees with asthma need to understand their own condition.
- 4 Employees should be protected from the causes of occupational asthma.
- 5 People who develop occupational asthma need immediate protection.
- 6 Health surveillance is vital in identifying occupational asthma.
- 7 Employees should look for the right help straight away.
- 8 Prompt diagnosis and treatment are crucial.
- 9 Employers and employees need to keep informed.
- 10 Employees should know how to help someone having an asthma attack.

Ten steps to significantly reduce the impact of asthma in the workplace.

1 Nobody should have to breathe second-hand smoke at work.

Second-hand smoke is an avoidable cause of asthma and triggers attacks in people who already have the condition. Charter partners believe we all have a right to breathe clean air at work. We encourage employers to develop policies on smoke-free workplaces and we recommend the Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation's voluntary 'National Clean Air Awards' scheme.

2 Employees should enjoy reasonable protection from asthma triggers at work.

None of us should have to do work that makes us ill. People with asthma are often sensitive to substances that are harmless to others, so it is important that both the employer and employee understand what triggers an individual's asthma. Charter partners understand that a healthy work environment is in everybody's interest. We also recognise that it would be impossible to protect all employees from all possible triggers, so we recommend that employees approach their managers to discuss what makes their asthma worse and when. Employers in turn should look for the best practical solution to protect their employees to keep them healthy and productive.

3 Employees with asthma need to understand their own condition.

Asthma affects each person differently. There is a wide range of triggers and although some are common to many people (such as house-dust mites or second-hand smoke) many people will also be sensitive to less-common triggers. Four in every ten people with asthma find their asthma can get in the way of them doing their job, either as a result of an attack at work, disrupted sleep or perhaps the need to avoid triggers. Employers can only respond effectively when an employee understands their asthma and how to manage it. People who know what triggers their asthma can protect themselves more effectively. The Asthma UK Adviceline can also help people to understand their asthma.

What to do in an asthma attack:

- 1 Use your reliever (blue) inhaler.
- 2 Sit up and loosen any tight clothing.
- 3 If no immediate improvement during an attack, continue to take one puff of your reliever inhaler every minute for five minutes or until symptoms improve.
- 4 If your symptoms do not improve in five minutes – or if you are in doubt – call 999 or a doctor urgently.

Every year in the UK around 3,000 people develop asthma because they are exposed to dangerous substances at work and 750,000 people with asthma find things at work worsen their asthma.

Unlike pre-existing asthma, occupational asthma can be cured if it is identified quickly enough. Yet many fail to get treatment soon enough, either because the occupational cause of their asthma is not identified in time or perhaps because they are not aware their condition is caused by work.

This charter is founded on the belief that no one should have to work in an environment that makes them ill. By endorsing this charter our charter partners accept their responsibility to ensure this vital information reaches those who need it most.

Glossary

Occupational asthma

Asthma that is caused by exposure to substances at work.

Pre-existing asthma

Asthma that the employee already has, perhaps since childhood.

Asthmagens

Things that can cause occupational asthma in people who did not have it before.

Sensitisation

When people develop an allergy after being exposed to even a small amount of an asthmagen.

Triggers

Things that can set off an asthma attack.

Pre-existing asthma

There are 5.1 million people in the UK with asthma – 3.7 million of whom are adults. In most cases their asthma is not caused by work, but there can be things at work that make it worse, even to the point of triggering an asthma attack. In fact 43% of people with asthma report that their condition can get in the way of them doing their job and more than 18 million working days are lost to asthma each year.

Asthma now costs the NHS an average of £850 million a year. There were more than 69,000 hospital admissions for asthma in the UK in 2001, 75% of which were avoidable. It has been estimated that 90% of the UK's 1,400 annual deaths from asthma could have been prevented. When an adult develops asthma for the first time it is worth considering whether an occupational cause is responsible.

Asthma in the workplace

38% of people said cigarette smoke triggered their asthma

4 **Employees should be protected from the causes of occupational asthma.**

Employers have legal responsibilities to protect the health and safety of their employees, and there is also a strong business case to make sure that employees are 'healthy, happy and here'. Almost all cases of occupational asthma can be prevented. Employers should prevent exposure where they can and control it where they cannot. When a case of occupational asthma is confirmed employers should review their procedures. Employees have to play their part by following safety procedures and using any approved safety equipment.

Doctors and nurses

The British Guideline on the Management of Asthma says:

Occupational asthma 'should be suspected in all adults with airflow obstruction and positively searched for in those with high-risk occupations'.

'Adults with airflow obstruction should be asked "Are you better on days away from work?" and "Are you better on holiday?"' If the answer is 'yes' occupational asthma should be investigated.

Thorax, 2003; 58 (Supplement 1): 1-94

5 **People who develop occupational asthma need immediate protection.**

Charter partners are committed to protecting employees. Sometimes, people will have to be moved away from the asthmagens for their own protection. Occasionally they will have to be found different work and, very rarely, it may not be possible for them to carry on working for the same employer. Where the employee is removed they are protected. Where the asthmagen is removed everybody is protected. In the past some employees have been treated unfairly when they have developed occupational asthma. Our aim as charter partners is to make sure people do not suffer discrimination and receive the full and fair protection of the law.

6

Health surveillance is vital in identifying occupational asthma.

Where asthmagens are used at work, employers should have a programme of health surveillance that may include things such as regular health questions or lung function tests. Health surveillance is important, because spotting occupational asthma early is the only way it can be cured. It will reduce the number of cases overall and help to prevent new cases occurring.

7

Employees should look for the right help straight away. Some employees face a much higher risk of occupational asthma than others. People working in the baking and flour industries, spray-painters, wood workers, health workers and people working with chemicals seem to face the highest risk. It may be that there is a hidden risk to some other employees, including cleaners and hairdressers. Everyone at risk should understand the causes and signs of occupational asthma and the importance of early diagnosis and treatment. If you are at all worried talk to your doctor about your symptoms straight away.

Common asthmagens

There are hundreds of known asthmagens. Here are some of the most common:

- isocyanates – typically found in vehicle spray-painting and foam making
- flour and grain dust
- glutaraldehyde – a chemical disinfectant. Mainly used in the healthcare, offshore, paper and agricultural sectors
- wood dust
- latex (natural rubber latex)
- solder/colophony – mainly found in the electrical and electronics industries.

8

Prompt diagnosis and treatment are crucial.

All those at risk from occupational asthma must have access to prompt and accurate diagnosis, leading to swift and appropriate treatment. For many the best chance of having their occupational asthma identified is at their doctor's surgery. Doctors and nurses should always consider the possibility of an occupational cause in new cases of asthma among adults and refer to a specialist in occupational medicine where appropriate.

Asthma in the workplace

62% of people said dust triggered their asthma

Asthma is widespread

5.1 million people
in the UK have asthma

9 Employers and employees need to keep informed. Everyone operating in a high-asthma-risk business should have information on the risks of occupational asthma, including prevention, identification and treatment. Employers and employees should make sure that they understand their responsibilities and charter partners will set an example.

Top triggers of asthma at work

For many people asthma is a kind of allergy and different people can have different triggers. On top of that people may find that other things like cold air or stress can trigger their asthma. Asthma UK asked employees with asthma if things at work made their asthma worse – 40% said ‘yes’ and these are the things they blamed:

- Dust 62%
- Cigarette smoke 38%
- Stress 27%
- Chemicals 19%
- Fumes 17%
- Perfumes/air fresheners 14%

10 Employees should know how to react to an asthma attack. Asthma attacks are serious. They can be fatal. Most fatal asthma attacks happen to adults and 90% of asthma deaths are preventable. People with asthma should think about telling their nearest first aider and trusted employees about their asthma and what to do if they have an asthma attack. Charter partners understand that asthma attacks can happen to employees, visitors and customers and will provide staff with the information they need, for example, making sure Asthma UK’s asthma attack cards are kept in every first-aid-box.

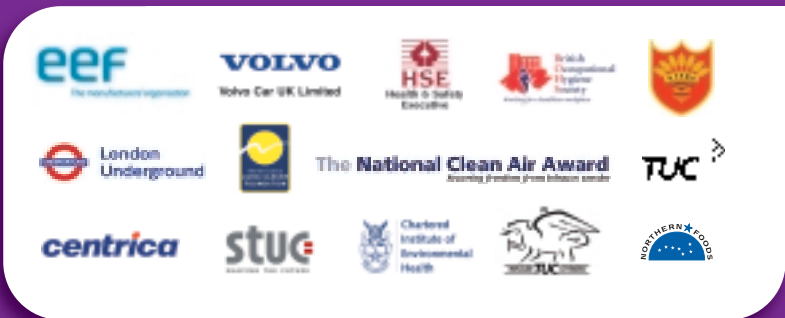
Northern Foods – a study in good practice

Northern Foods well understand the importance of protecting staff from exposure to flour dust – a known asthmagen. When a major breakdown occurred on the bulk flour handling system at one of its bakeries, action was taken quickly to ensure that standards of protection were maintained, despite the obvious disruption to normal operations.

The stand-by equipment brought in to enable the site to continue production required flour from bags to be manually sieved. Risk assessment identified that this work could increase exposure to flour dust so, in order to protect staff, a range of measures were put in place. These included:

- Installing local exhaust ventilation (LEV) over the sieving operation.
- Providing mechanical assistance for lifting and supporting bags of flour during splitting and pouring. This both reduced manual handling risk and avoided the need for dusty bags to be held close to the body.
- Training employees in the new safe system of work. This included the Breathe Easy training programme.
- Carrying out face-fit tests to ensure dust masks were provided that were suitable for the hazard and the individual.
- Implementing a strict cleaning regime for the LEV filters and the working environment. A vacuum cleaner, electrically safe for use in dusty environments, was used to prevent dust being released into the air.
- Increasing the frequency of health surveillance for employees involved in sieving and flour handling.
- Supervising activities closely to ensure that all protective measures were properly used at all times and that good housekeeping standards were maintained.

Partners of Asthma at Work – Your Charter:





Asthma UK

Asthma UK is dedicated to improving the health and well-being of the 5.1 million people in the UK with asthma.

Asthma UK Adviceline

Ask an asthma
nurse specialist

08457 01 02 03

asthma.org.uk/adviceline

9am–5pm, Monday–Friday

Order copies

To order more copies of *Asthma at Work – Your Charter*, please contact Asthma UK's Supporter & Information Team

020 7704 5888

info@asthma.org.uk

Find out more:

Asthma UK

www.asthma.org.uk

Health and Safety Executive

www.hse.gov.uk/asthma

The Trades Union Congress

www.tuc.org.uk

Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation

www.cleanairaward.org.uk

COSHH Essentials

www.coshh-essentials.org.uk

Occupational Asthma Guideline

www.bohrf.org.uk