

Briefing

Employment adjustments for people with asthma

Abridged content for sample purposes

Employment adjustments for people with asthma

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Introduction

What are respiratory conditions?

Respiratory conditions affect the respiratory system of an individual, from nose to lung. The respiratory system is in charge of transporting the oxygen contained in the outside air into our body. The oxygen is then used by our cells to create the energy required for our body to function.

Respiratory conditions impact different parts of the respiratory system; if the supply of oxygen is compromised, it can have an impact on other areas of the body and on how other parts of the body function. Amongst the most well-known respiratory conditions are asthma, pneumonia, lung cancer, cystic fibrosis, sleep apnea, tuberculosis, pulmonary fibrosis and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease but many other conditions exist.

What is asthma?

Although asthma is commonly regarded as a childhood condition, many adults have asthma and the symptoms of adult asthma are often more severe than those experienced by children.

Asthma is an inflammatory condition of the airways. When someone with asthma comes into contact with something they are allergic or sensitive to, their airways become narrower as the muscles around the airways tighten, making it harder to breathe. A person experiencing an asthma attack will often experience coughing, wheezing and a tightening in the chest.

The majority of people with asthma will only experience attacks when exposed to a particular irritant or trigger. However, some people with chronic asthma will experience symptoms of coughing and breathlessness almost continuously, although the severity of these symptoms will vary.

Employment adjustments for people with asthma

A trigger is anything that irritates the airways. Everyone's asthma is different and a person with asthma will often have several asthma triggers. Common triggers include:

- Respiratory infections – such as colds, flu, or bronchitis.
- Allergens – substances which some people are allergic to, e.g. pollen, foods, dust, moulds, feathers, animals fur, house-dust mites and some forms of medication.
- Irritants in the air – e.g. dirt, tobacco smoke, gases, chemical fumes and odours.
- Over-exertion – such as running too fast or carrying heavy loads.
- Climate and temperature – such as very cold air, windy weather, hot and humid weather, high ozone levels or sudden changes in weather.
- Emotional stress – such as anxiety, fear or excitement.

Managing workplace triggers

Once you have identified the triggers that aggravate an employee's condition you can take steps to manage the environment to prevent or reduce the employee's contact with them.

Identifying and managing environmental triggers can be challenging and the effectiveness of solutions will vary according to the number of triggers, the severity of the respiratory condition, the nature of the workplace and the individual's role.

Below are listed some steps to control respiratory conditions caused by allergens, e.g. pollen, foods, dust, mould, feathers, animal fur and house-dust mites. These will be beneficial to employees with asthma but also for all those with lung disease.

Dust and moulds

- Use a dehumidifier to dry the air as this makes it harder for house-dust mites to survive, and can prevent the growth of mould and mildew.
- Do not use brooms and brushes to dry sweep as it can cause high levels of air- borne dust. Instead use an industrial vacuum cleaner that has good suction and a filtered exhaust which does not scatter dust. Wipe all surfaces with a damp cloth and clean upholstery and soft furnishings using an anti-house dust mite product.
- Where it is not possible to make changes to the whole work environment, discuss with the employee and seek occupational health advice to determine whether providing the employee with a partitioned workstation that is as dust free as possible is an option.

Feathers or animal hair

- Restrict the presence of animals to your premises with the exception of work animals and assistance dogs for disabled people.
- Where it is not possible to remove animals from the workplace, protect the individual from exposure to the animal by designing animal facilities with local exhaust ventilation, providing segregated work and rest stations for vulnerable employees and restricting areas where the animal can go.

Food

Food allergies to certain fruit, nuts, shellfish, dairy products, eggs and food colourings are often associated with asthma and other respiratory conditions.

- Provide information about the food ingredients in your canteen or refreshment areas. Consult your employees and provide allergen free options wherever possible.
- Provide a food storage and preparation area for employees who need to bring pre- prepared food from home.
- Make sure catering for any work party or function has allergen-free alternatives.
- Raise awareness of food allergy and food hygiene among your workforce to reduce the risk of exposure and of cross contamination of foods.

Irritants in the air e.g. dirt, tobacco smoke, gases, chemical fumes, perfumes and odours

- Provide a well maintained ventilation system to prevent dirt and moisture accumulating. Ensure the system is not distributing pollutants throughout the worksite from locations within or outside the building.
- Have an air quality test performed by an industrial hygiene professional and ensure that appropriate actions are taken to act on results.
- In the UK, it is already against the law to smoke in buildings, but you can also prohibit smoking near the main entrance, exits and access routes to and from your building.

Employment adjustments for people with asthma

- Use the low allergen/non-toxic building materials, furnishings and supplies wherever possible, including cleaning products, pesticides, gardening products.
- Refer to Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Control of substances hazardous to health (COSHH) [1].
- Minimise and control the use of known irritants and pollutants using Control of substances hazardous to health (COSHH) standards[2].
- Store, handle and use hazardous substances with care to minimise the presence of airborne dust or fumes e.g. store hazardous chemicals in a fume cupboard.
- Provide advance notice to the workforce of any events like painting, pesticide application, floor waxing or carpet shampooing.
- If possible have cleaning and maintenance activities conducted when the building is not occupied to reduce employee exposure to irritants, or if this is not possible offer the option of flexible working practices such as home working. Some cleaning agents are sensitisers; consider this when selecting the products used in your buildings and talk to your supplier about this.
- Restrict employee access to high-risk areas and ensure employees wear personal protective clothing e.g. gloves and overalls and take regular breaks where necessary.

[1] and [2] HSE, COSHH : [hse.gov.uk](https://www.hse.gov.uk)

Conditions triggered by respiratory infections, climate and temperature

- Monitor sickness absence related to asthma separately from non-respiratory related sickness absence and consider making reasonable adjustments to attendance management systems. For more information about managing sickness absence and the law see our 'Managing sickness absence' briefing.
- Encourage employees to protect their health and to make enquiries with their medical adviser about steps to reduce the incidence of colds and respiratory infections.
- Regulate the temperature in the workplace and try to reduce draughts.
- Encourage employees to monitor environmental ozone levels and consider allowing home working on days when ozone levels are high^[3], if this is not already standard practice.
- Allow employees to wear scarves and extra clothing^[4] when working outdoors on cold days even if this is in conflict with your dress code.
- Consider adjusting your dress code for everyone if this not already standard practice.

[3] Asthma UK, Air pollution

[4] Asthma UK, Weather

Over-exertion or emotional stress

- Encourage employees to carry their reliever inhaler at all times and allow them to take their inhaler 5-10 minutes if they wish to before physical activity or a test or examination takes place.
- Give employees advance notice of when they will be expected to take part in tests or physical activity outside their normal duties.
- Consider reallocating minor duties that the employee finds aggravate their condition to other members of the team.
- Assess the employee's route to their work-station, taking into account distances to be walked and any flights of stairs to be climbed. Try to provide resting points on long routes and consider installing lifts for employees who find climbing stairs difficult to manage.
- Be alert to the risk of workplace stress and pressure for employees with asthma.

Asthma treatments

There are effective treatments that help people with asthma to control their symptoms. The two main kind of asthma treatment, called relievers and preventers, are commonly taken using an inhaler or using an aerosol-based inhaler taken with a spacer or mouth mask. Access to different treatments vary depending on which country the individual is located.

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