

Occupational Asthma: What does it mean and what happens next?

Occupational asthma is caused directly by work and is usually the result of an allergy to something inhaled in the workplace over a period of time. It is also known as **industrial asthma**.

It is different from **work exacerbated or aggravated asthma**, which is when someone with pre-existing asthma finds that it is made worse when working in an environment where there are irritant dusts or fumes; or even when the workplace is cold or the job is physically strenuous.

The diagnosis of **occupational asthma** can be a blow, and we appreciate you may be concerned about the future of your health and your job.

How did I develop occupational asthma?

It is not known why some people develop an allergy while others do not. Usually it develops within a couple of years of starting work, but sometimes it takes longer. During this period your immune system is building an allergic response – and a ‘memory’ to the work substance (known as the **allergen**). Once this allergic response has developed, you will generally get asthma symptoms if you come into contact with the allergen. Many people also have sneezing, a runny nose or itchy eyes.

In a lot of cases, people with occupational asthma have made **antibodies** to the allergen. These are found in the blood or by skin testing; you may have had a blood or skin test to look for these antibodies. They are not themselves harmful but are a marker of your occupational allergy.

What happens when I have been diagnosed with occupational asthma?

The doctor will spend time with you explaining the diagnosis and the implications for your health in the future. You may be advised not to work with the allergen in the long term, but sometimes it can be appropriate to continue your work for a short time, wearing suitable respiratory protection, while you make longer term plans. Occupational asthma can be a serious condition leading to severe, chronic asthma if exposure to the allergen that causes it continues unchecked.

We know that this may be a difficult time for you and we are very happy to help where we can. In most cases there is no hurry to make a decision; we will give you as much time as you need.

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What are the implications for my health in the future?

- The allergy that causes occupational asthma will always be with you, but we have good evidence to show that if you avoid contact with the allergen, most people will recover very well.
- Sometimes this happens as soon as you are no longer exposed, but sometimes recovery can take up to two years.
- Sometimes, the longer you have had occupational asthma, and have been working with the allergen, the more serious are the symptoms and the longer they take to go away.
- In some cases – where the asthma symptoms are quite serious and have been present for some time – they may not go away completely
- This is the main reason we advise you to avoid contact with the allergen in the future. Even inhaling tiny amounts may be enough to trigger and prolong your asthma symptoms.
- When you have managed to avoid all contact with the allergen, you are likely to find yourself feeling much better than you have for a long time.
- You may wish to continue attending our clinic for a while so we can keep an eye on your symptoms and make sure you are recovering. We would be very happy to help in this way.

What are the implications for my work?

- You will be advised not to come into contact with the allergen in the future, but it may be feasible to carry on working with it in the short term, taking great care to avoid as much exposure as possible and to wear effective respiratory protection
- Your employer has a duty under the Health & Safety at Work Act to minimize any exposure to hazardous substances in the workplace.
- Your employer also has a duty to notify your occupational asthma to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). Generally the HSE will then want to visit your place of work to see if there are ways in which other people can be prevented from getting the same problem.
- Once you have been given the diagnosis of occupational asthma, you will need to negotiate with your employer (and, if you have one, your occupational health doctor or nurse) to see if changes can be made to your work to make it safer for you – or if you can be given an alternative job. Most employers will try to help you in these ways.
- If your employer cannot find you other, safe work, you may need to work elsewhere. Some employers offer compensation if this happens. You would need to discuss this with them.
- If you are looking for a new job, make sure you will not be exposed to the same allergen in the new workplace.

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- Having occupational asthma should not make you unfit to take a new job – unless of course it involves further exposure to the allergen that caused your problem in the first place.
- On the whole, people with occupational asthma do well in the long term, although the necessary adjustments can take some time.

What about compensation?

- Because you have occupational asthma you may be eligible to make a claim for a small amount of compensation from the Benefits Agency. This is known as Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit; unfortunately it is not available to people who are self-employed
- We can give you a leaflet explaining how to claim Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit; or download information and a claim form from <https://www.gov.uk/industrial-injuries-disablement-benefit>
- You may decide to take a legal case against your employer. We are not lawyers and therefore cannot advise you about this; you will need to seek advice from a lawyer working in this field of law, and this information should be available through the Citizens' Advice Bureau. If you are in a Trades Union they will be able to help you with this. If you decide to make a legal claim, then you must do so within three years of the date when you learned that you had occupational asthma.

Further advice and support

- **We are available to offer advice and support – please phone and ask to speak to one of our Clinical Nurse Specialists or Doctors on 020 7351 8341.**
- **Take a look at our website www.lungsatwork.org.uk.**
- **Your Trade Union or Professional Association will also be able to offer you support and legal advice.**