

Common Allergens and Irritants Found in the Workplace

Helpful Tips

- If you think your workplace is making you sick, let your supervisor and building management know there might be a problem. Document the conversations.
- Track your symptoms to determine if they are worse at work; talk to your doctor.
- Increase air circulation to improve temperature and humidity control and dilute levels of harmful chemicals from office machines or furnishings.
- Ensure that fresh air supply dampers and room air vents are open.
- Remove or modify partitions or obstructions that block fresh airflow.
- Use room fans to improve circulation.
- Keep humidity below %50
- During periods of construction and renovation, contain dust and debris within the construction area.
- Enforce no-smoking and no-animal policies.
- Consider a desktop air cleaner; choose one with a HEPA filter that does not emit ozone (contact the manufacturer to confirm).
- Encourage workers with colds, flu, or other contagious illnesses to stay home until they are healthy.

Steps to Asthma Control

- 1. Work closely with your healthcare team** to understand, manage, and prevent symptoms; keep all routine asthma care visits.
- 2. Take all medicines as prescribed;** know their names, when, how, and why to use them.
- 3. Learn what triggers your asthma symptoms;** avoid these triggers as much as possible.
- 4. Treat asthma symptoms as soon as they appear,** following your Asthma Action Plan.

NOTES

- Although all care has been taken, this chart is a general guide only which is not intended to be a substitute for individual medical advice/treatment. Allergy and asthma network and Allergy and immunology awareness program in Qatar expressly disclaims all responsibility (including negligence) for any loss, damage or personal injury resulting from reliance on the information contained.
- We would like to thank allergy and asthma network for giving us the permission to include their patient education material in our product.

For more information on asthma visit:

Allergy and immunology awareness program in Qatar:
<http://aiap.hamad.qa>

Allergy and asthma network in Vienna:
allergyasthmanetwork.org



Patient Family Education Unit

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Allergy and Immunology Awareness Program



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Asthma is an ongoing lung disease that causes episodes of coughing, wheezing, and shortness of breath. Like all chronic illnesses, asthma cannot be cured, but you can prevent and ease symptoms.

The key to asthma control is to stay away from the things that irritate your lungs. Most of these things are in the air we breathe.

Indoor allergens and irritants can cause itchy, watery eyes; sneezy, runny nose; sinus and ear congestion; headache; or fatigue. For people with asthma, they can spark coughing, wheezing, and difficulty breathing – and lead to a full-blown asthma attack.

At least one out of every four adults with asthma experiences symptoms triggered by conditions at work. This includes those whose asthma is caused by the work environment, as well as those whose pre-existing asthma is aggravated by allergens or irritants in the workplace.

The US-based Occupational Safety and Health Association (OSHA) says more than half (%52) of reported indoor air problems in offices are caused by inadequate ventilation, another %16 come from specific allergens and irritants inside the building.

Removing allergens, irritants, and contaminants from the air inside the workplace will reduce your allergy and asthma symptoms, along with your need for medication or emergency treatment.

Common Allergens and Irritants Found in the Workplace:

Secondhand Smoke



Secondhand smoke is dangerous. For people with asthma, especially young children, it can set off symptoms and cause long-term lung damage.

Solution

- Enforce a no-smoking policy.
- Ask individuals who are smoking outdoors to stay away from windows and doors.

Dust Mites



These tiny insects are found in upholstered furniture and carpets and are almost impossible to get rid of. They feed off human skin or wherever there is moisture. Allergens from their bodies and waste irritate airways and eyes on contact.

Solution

- Keep humidity levels inside your office below %50.
- Eliminate dust, musty stacks of books and papers, upholstery, and bedding where they might live.

Mold



Mold lives in damp areas, both indoors and outdoors, sending tiny spores flying through the air and into the lungs. Some molds are toxic.

Solution

- Search out and fix leaks under the sinks and windows, in kitchens and bathrooms, near water fountains.
- Improve circulation in closed storage areas.
- Minimize or carefully maintain potted plants.
- Keep humidity levels inside your office below %50.

Cockroaches and Rodents



Allergens from insects and rodents settle in dust, upholstery, and bedding, where they are easily inhaled when disturbed. These pests need water and food to survive.

Solution

- Fix leaky pipes.
- Clean crumbs and food spills and keep food in sealed containers.
- Clean counters and refrigerators from spills and food.
- Eliminate stacks of paper and books.

Pets



Cats, dogs, and other furry or feathered animals shed animal dander – tiny particles of protein from skin, saliva, and waste that settle in carpets and dust. When disturbed, these allergens fly into the air and irritate the eyes and lungs of sensitive people. No breed of animal is ‘allergen-free.’

Solution

Do not allow any animals in the workplace.

Chemicals and Strong Odors



Chemicals from office machines, cleaning products, air fresheners, paints, and perfumes, as well as new carpets and furnishings, are strong lung irritants.

Solution

- Use low or no odor cleaners.
- Do not use scented air fresheners.
- Establish a no-perfume policy.
- Air out new carpets and furnishings before opening renovated areas.
- Ensure good air circulation around copiers and other office machines.

Germs and Bacteria



Respiratory viruses and bacterial infections can trigger asthma symptoms in people of all ages.

Solution

- Practice good hygiene: wash hands frequently. Keep desks, counters, and kitchen and bathroom surfaces clean.
- Promote telecommuting so people with colds or flu can stay at home until they are healthy.