

Marijuana and Work-Related Asthma

Work-related asthma is a lung disease caused or made worse by exposure to substances in the workplace. Legal industrial-scale marijuana (*Cannabis sativa*) processing has highlighted a connection between plant dust inhalation and a risk for work-related breathing problems.

Dust from many parts of the marijuana plant (leaves, buds and stems) as well as pollen and smoke are associated with allergic reactions. Common examples of allergic reactions include asthma, rash, and a few case reports of anaphylactic shock.¹ Work-related asthma has been reported in cannabis laboratory workers.

In addition to the marijuana dust itself, industry workers are exposed to other asthma-causing substances such as mold, pesticides, soil components, ozone, and cleaning chemicals.



Cannabis sativa

Workers may:

- Have a hard time breathing with wheeze, cough, and chest tightness
- Get asthma symptoms from ongoing everyday exposure or from a one-time upset event
- Develop asthma even though they have been around a substance for years
- Improve their health if they stop being around the asthma-causing substance early enough

Workers at risk include:

- Growers, production workers, extract manufacturers, and retail stockists
- Marijuana laboratory and research staff
- Police and drug enforcement officers

Recommendations

- Tell your employer if you feel shortness of breath from work.
- Talk to your doctor about your health symptoms and your job.
- Consult a safety and health professional to help with ventilation, respiratory protection, and protective clothing.
- Washington employers can request a free and confidential [L&I Consultation](http://Ini.wa.gov/safety/consultation) (Ini.wa.gov/safety/consultation).

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Worker Stories

Law enforcement worker exposed to marijuana.

A 58 year-old male evidence room manager's asthma became aggravated at work while opening a box containing marijuana paraphernalia and a water bong. Water from the bong had leaked inside the box and released a strong odor that overwhelmed him. His asthma episodes increased following continual exposure to marijuana on the job. He had to take 14 days off work to recover.

Marijuana processor develops breathing problems at work.

A 55 year-old female worker developed asthma on the job when tasked with trimming marijuana leaves in preparation for packaging. Her workspace did not have adequate ventilation and breathing protection was not available. The worker does not intend to return to the jobsite.

Marijuana processor experiences shortness of breath at work.

A 29 year-old male marijuana processor experienced an allergic reaction brought on by handling marijuana. He quickly noticed the following symptoms: shortness of breath, itchiness, watery eyes, and chest tightness. Despite relocating to a different work area his symptoms continued and he left the industry.

Myth: *Some people believe they can strengthen their lungs to resist the toxic effect of substances.*

Reality: *There is no way to toughen up your lungs. If you experience breathing problems at work, you should speak to your doctor.*

Tracking work-related asthma in Washington

The SHARP Program at the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries tracks work-related lung disease. Work-related asthma is a notifiable condition in Washington and surveillance has been ongoing since 2001.

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For more information, contact the Safety and Health Assessment & Research for Prevention (SHARP) Program at the WA State Department of Labor and Industries at Lni.wa.gov/Safety/Research/OccHealth/Asthma/default.asp, SHARP@Lni.wa.gov or toll free at 1-888-667-4277.

¹*Cannabis sativa*: the unconventional "weed" allergen (2015). TL Ocampo & TS Rans. Ann Allergy Asthma Immunol 114:187-192. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.anai.2015.01.004>.