

Report profile



Occupational asthma in Australia

Summary

Asthma is a chronic inflammatory disease of the airways that affects more than 2 million Australians. Occupational exposure accounts for up to 15% of new asthma cases in adults.

A clear causal relationship can sometimes be established between the disease onset and exposure to agents in the workplace (known as occupational asthma). Together with pre-existing asthma provoked or worsened by environmental conditions or substances at work (work-aggravated asthma), it is one of the most commonly reported occupational respiratory diseases in Australia and other developed countries.

As a type of asthma with known causes, occupational asthma is largely preventable through effective control of exposure to causal agents.

This report includes a discussion of the monitoring and surveillance of the disease and its risk factors.

This bulletin addresses several key questions regarding this form of asthma:

1. What is occupational asthma? (How is it defined, what are the different types, and in what ways does it differ from 'normal' and work-aggravated asthma?)
2. What causes it? (What are the factors that increase the risk of occupational asthma and which occupations present the greatest risks?)
3. How common is the disease? (What is the prevalence and incidence of occupational asthma in Australia?)
4. What are its consequences? (How does occupational asthma affect the individual and the health care system?)

The epidemiology (prevalence and incidence) of occupational asthma can be used to target where interventions are needed and to monitor and evaluate their effects.

This report was produced by the Asthma, Arthritis and Environmental Health Unit of the Institute.

About the unit

The Asthma, Arthritis and Environmental Health Unit (AAEHU) monitors asthma, arthritis and osteoporosis nationally. It also reports on the impact of the environment on the health of the Australian population. A major component of the Unit's work is to study the role of primary care in managing asthma, arthritis and other chronic diseases. Information is also generated on several diseases and conditions in which the external environment plays an important role, such as infectious diseases, allergies and musculoskeletal problems. ■

Fast facts

Occupational Asthma in Australia:

- 1,000–3,000 new cases of occupational asthma are diagnosed each year in Australia.
- These cases constitute about 9–15% of adult-onset asthma attributed to exposures at work.
- People with occupational asthma often have to change jobs or careers to relieve their symptoms; hence, work disruption and economic hardship are common consequences of the disease.
- Although not curable, occupational asthma is largely preventable through actions that avoid or reduce exposure to workplace sensitizers and irritants.

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