

Respiratory Sensitizers, Workplace Exposure, & Occupational Asthma

A respiratory sensitizer, if inhaled, is a substance capable of triggering an allergic reaction in the airways (asthma). The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) notes over 300 known or suspected substances in the workplace can cause or worsen occupational, or work-related, asthma. Sensitization generally develops over time, but once this reaction occurs, further exposure to smaller amounts may produce symptoms, which can be life-threatening.

Many workplaces and industries can have respiratory sensitizers, including: healthcare, manufacturing, construction, educational, office/administrative, laboratory, animal health, cleaning services, cosmetology, and food production.

At your workplace, you need to take action to protect your workers from unnecessary exposure to respiratory sensitizers. Ensure you conduct industrial hygiene (IH) surveys for all work areas and brief employees on the findings. IH surveys include assessments of workplace chemical(s), the controls currently in place, and recommendations for further control. The control recommendations need to follow the NIOSH hierarchy of controls, as required in Department of Defense Instruction (DoDI) 6055.05, Occupational and Environmental Health.

You can find additional information on respiratory sensitizers and occupational asthma at:

- NIOSH Workplace Safety & Health Topics – Work-related asthma:
<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/asthma/default.html>
- OSHA Safety and Health Topics – Occupational Asthma:
<https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/occupationalasthma/>
- AIHA Synergist article, “Respiratory Sensitizers: Strategies to Address Occupational Asthma Caused by Respirable Allergens,” June 2020:
<https://synergist.aiha.org/20200607-respiratory-sensitizers>

For additional information on the SMCX’s services, please visit the SMCX-hosted website at:
<https://www.smcx.org/>.



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