

Watch out for flour dust

May 2004

Frequently breathing in flour dust may lead to occupational asthma.

Minimising flour dust in the air can reduce the health risk.

This fact sheet provides information for employers, apprentices, employees and managers in the baking, restaurant and food preparation industries.

Health problems from baking flour dust

Breathing in flour dust frequently at work can lead to some people developing a health condition known as occupational asthma.

This condition can cause long-term or life-long health problems.

What is occupational asthma?

Asthma is a condition of the lungs where the airways to the lungs narrow and cause coughing, chest tightness, wheezing and shortness of breath.

The cause is unknown but it often starts or is made worse because of a number of factors in the environment.

Occupational asthma develops when a person becomes very sensitive to a specific substance, such as flour dust, which they frequently breathe in at the workplace.

In the baking, restaurant and food preparation industries, dust from baking flour is a factor in the environment that may cause occupational asthma in some workers.

WorkSafe

Westcentre, 5th Floor, 1260 Hay Street
West Perth, Western Australia 6005
Telephone: (08) 9327 8777 Infoline: 1300 307 877
Facsimile: (08) 9321 8973 Email: safety@docep.wa.gov.au
Internet: www.docep.wa.gov.au

**commission
for occupational
safety and health**

Employers and managers

Providing a safe workplace

Employers must provide and maintain, where practicable, a working environment in which employees are not exposed to hazards. This responsibility includes providing information, instruction, training and supervision so that employees are not exposed to hazards and includes addressing any health risks (such as occupational asthma) that could arise at the workplace from the hazard of baking flour dust.

[Refer to Section 19 of the *Occupational Safety and Health Act 1984*]

Employers are required to consult with safety and health representatives (if any) and employees on safety and health matters.

The risk management process: hazard identification, risk assessment and risk control

The Occupational Safety and Health Regulations 1996 (Regulation 3.1) require employers to carry out a risk management process at the workplace. This involves a three-step process to:

- i) identify hazards;
- ii) assess the risks; and
- iii) control risks.

Ways to reduce the risks of occupational asthma

The third step in the risk management process is to implement control measures to eliminate or reduce the risks from hazards. An additional step is to ensure the measures are monitored and reviewed on an ongoing basis to check they are working.

When baking flour dust is identified as a potential hazard at the workplace, the control measures (means) to reduce the potential health risks for employees include:

- installing and maintaining good ventilation and exhaust systems;
- training staff in work practices that help to reduce the amount of baking flour dust in the air; and
- providing Class P1 disposable masks that comply with Australian/New Zealand Standard, *AS/NZS 1716* (compliance should be indicated on the packaging for the masks) and instructing staff to wear the masks when an activity results in clouds of visible dust.

Work practices to reduce the amount of flour dust in the air include:

- gently tipping and shaking bags;
- sprinkling flour instead of throwing it;
- placing ingredients into the flour instead of dropping them;
- rolling flour bags from the bottom when tipping, to avoid having to fold them when disposing; and
- starting the mixer on a slow speed until wet and dry ingredients are combined.

Regional offices:

Bunbury (08) 9722 2888

Karratha (08) 9185 0900

TTY (08) 9327 8838

Employees and apprentices

How to recognise the symptoms of occupational asthma

There is a period from several weeks to many years when there are no symptoms.

When the symptoms start developing:

- a runny nose at work is common at the beginning;
- after a variable period of time, coughing, chest tightness, shortness of breath and wheezing develop, which occur more often and worsen until there is a pattern of taking sick leave because of the symptoms. Coughing may be the most noticeable symptom. Breathlessness and wheezing are uncommon symptoms;
- sometimes the symptoms will develop within a few minutes to an hour of breathing in the flour dust. More often, the symptoms do not develop for four to eight hours after being at work and get worse after work or during the night;
- some people may only suffer night time attacks of coughing and other symptoms, which wake them during the night; and
- in the early stages, the symptoms are mild early in the week, worsen towards the end of the week, and improve over the weekend.

Some people may have had asthma since childhood or before starting the job. This is usually a different type of asthma to the condition known as occupational asthma. If you have this other type of asthma, and it gets worse while working with baking flour, talk to your doctor and employer.

Take action

If you suspect you have symptoms of occupational asthma, or you have a condition that might increase your sensitivity to flour dust, talk to your employer, a safety and health representative (if there is one at work), a union representative (if you are a member) and/or your doctor.

If the cause of occupational asthma is not recognised, or you continue to work while suffering symptoms, there is a risk that the asthma will last for years, even after leaving the job, and possible for the rest of your life.



Further information

Speak to your relevant union or employer organisation. Alternatively, contact one of the following organisations:

WorkSafe

Department of Consumer and Employment
Protection

1260 Hay Street WEST PERTH WA 6005

Telephone: 1300 307 877

Fax: (08) 9321 8973

Email: safety@docep.wa.gov.au

Internet: www.safetyline.wa.gov.au

(More information on occupational asthma is available on this Internet site.)

Chamber of Commerce and Industry Western Australia

180 Hay Street EAST PERTH WA 6004

Telephone: (08) 9365 7415

Fax: (08) 9365 7550

Email: osh@cciwa.com

Internet : www.cciwa.com

UnionsWA

Level 4, 79 Stirling Street PERTH WA 6000

Telephone: (08) 9328 7877

Fax: (08) 9328 8132

Email: unionswa@tlcwa.org.au

Acknowledgement

This fact sheet was prepared in consultation with the Hazards Advisory Committee of the Commission for Occupational Safety and Health.

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This document is available on request in other formats to assist people with special needs.