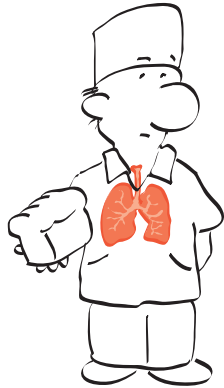


BAKER'S ASTHMA



What is Baker's Asthma?

Asthma is a common lung disease that makes breathing difficult. When it is caused by breathing in hazardous substances in the workplace, it is called occupational asthma. The name “baker's asthma” is commonly used to describe occupational asthma in bakery employees. If you work in a bakery or similar workplace, you are at risk for getting it.

Asthma can affect your ability to work and your overall quality of life. It can even threaten your life.

What Are the Symptoms of Baker's Asthma?

People suffering from baker's asthma often do not realize that their symptoms are work-related. The symptoms of baker's asthma are the same as for regular asthma. They include some or all of the following:

- cough
- shortness of breath
- wheezing, and
- chest tightness.

In baker's asthma the symptoms usually become worse during the working day and throughout the workweek. The symptoms decrease on days off and during vacations.

If you have these symptoms, go to your doctor. Also, tell your union steward, joint health and safety committee or your supervisor about your symptoms.

What Causes Baker's Asthma?

Baker's asthma is caused by breathing in flour dust and other substances commonly found in bakeries and similar workplaces. Table 1 lists some examples.

Table 1: Substances known to cause baker's asthma

Asthma-causing substances	Examples
Flour and grains	wheat, rye, barley, soy or buckwheat
Additives and enzymes that are added to improve the bread quality	alpha amylase
Other allergens	yeast, eggs or egg powder, sesame seeds, nuts, mites and moulds

How Can Baker's Asthma be Prevented?

Baker's asthma can be largely prevented by eliminating or reducing the level of flour dust, additives and other asthma-causing agents breathed in by bakery workers (see Table 1 for examples). Both employers and employees have a role in prevention.

The employer's role is:

- first, try to **eliminate** the substance or substances causing the asthma from the workplace
- if elimination is not possible, **substitute** ingredients that are less harmful and produce less dust (e.g., use dust-reduced flour and liquid enzymes)
- if substitution is not possible, **control** the level of flour dust released into the workplace by enclosing dusty machinery and installing local exhaust ventilation
- provide **personal protective equipment** (PPE) (e.g., a face mask) to employees and provide training on how to use it properly. PPE is the last line of defence, to be used when exposures are not already prevented or significantly reduced by elimination, substitution and control
- train employees on safe working and housekeeping methods (e.g., wet-scrubbing, vacuuming surfaces)
- monitor the flour dust level in the workplace air by taking air samples regularly to make sure that the level stays below the guidelines set by the *Occupational Health & Safety Act*.

Informing employees about potential workplace hazards and providing proper training are important. Seek advice from occupational health professionals on how to recognize, evaluate and control workplace hazards and their health effects. Provide education and information to employees on occupational asthma and its control measures.

What Should I do if I Have Trouble Breathing?

If you have symptoms of baker's asthma, act right away:

- make an appointment right away with your family doctor
- tell your doctor your symptoms, where you work, what your job is and what substances you use every day
- take this fact sheet to your doctor
- ask for help from an occupational health professional (e.g., an occupational health doctor or nurse), and
- talk to your supervisor, as well as your joint health and safety committee, union health and safety representative or an injured worker group.

If your doctor tells you that you have occupational asthma, you should be removed from the work area or job to prevent it from getting worse.

Occupational asthma is a serious illness. If you do not get treatment, it can cause permanent disability. Early recognition and treatment are very important to keep this illness from getting worse.

Employees can:

- learn about the hazards in the workplace by speaking to the health and safety representative, an occupational health professional (e.g., an occupational hygienist, nurse or doctor) or the employer
- follow safe work practices to reduce dusts
- wear appropriate PPE in dusty areas
- report anything that interferes with proper dust control (e.g., a broken ventilation system)
- follow strict housekeeping practices, such as wet-scrubbing and vacuum cleaning to clean working areas and remove flour dust
- participate in all health and safety programs in the workplace, and
- be aware of the early signs of baker's asthma.

For more information, contact:

- Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW): www.ohcow.on.ca or 1-877-817-0336
- Industrial Accident Prevention Association (IAPA): www.iapa.ca or 1-800-406-4272
- The Lung Association's Asthma Action Helpline: 1-800-668-7682
- The Lung Association: www.on.lung.ca or 1-888-566-5864
- The Asthma Society of Canada: www.asthma.ca or 1-866-787-4050
- Workplace Safety & Insurance Board: www.wsib.ca or 1-800-465-5606
- Ministry of Labour
health and safety information:
www.labour.gov.on.ca/english/hs/index.html
or 1-800-268-8013.

Contact OHCOW or IAPA for the companion brochure, *Baker's Asthma: Work-related Asthma and You: Preventing Work-related Asthma in Bakeries*, which accompanies this fact sheet.

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