

## Asthma at work

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Van couldn't understand why his asthma seemed better on the weekends and when he was on holiday, but was always a problem at work. He had never had asthma before starting his job as a baker.

"Maybe the asthma symptoms are caused by something you're breathing in at work," suggested his doctor. "We can arrange some tests to find out."

Asthma is a common problem in Australia, affecting one in four young children, one in seven teenagers and one in ten adults. It affects the airways of the lungs, making them sensitive to a wide range of things including pollen, dust and cigarette smoke. The airways react to these "triggers" by becoming narrower so that it's hard to breathe. Symptoms of asthma can include wheezing, a persistent dry cough, a tightness in the chest, or being short of breath. Some people with asthma may also get these symptoms when they exercise or exert themselves or become excited or distressed.

Some people, like Van, have a type of asthma called occupational asthma. This means their asthma is caused by something in their workplace. Occupational asthma can happen when something the person breathes in at work causes an otherwise healthy person to develop asthma, which is what happened to Van. This might not happen immediately - occupational asthma may take weeks, months or years to develop.

Which occupations are most at risk? These include food processing (especially baking), electronics, chemical and metal manufacturing or treatment, health carers and industries involving the use of paints, plastic and wood. Some of the substances causing the problem are chemical solvents or chemi-

cals used in spray painting; dust from insects or animals (eg cockroaches, shellfish, wool and laboratory animals) dust from wood, grain, flour, hay, tea and coffee.

This doesn't mean, of course, that everyone who works as a baker or a spray painter will develop asthma. Nor does it mean that all cases of asthma are caused by something a person works with. Exactly why some people and not others develop asthma isn't clear - but if you have relatives with asthma or other allergies, your risk may be higher. It's also important to remember that not everyone with asthma is affected by the same "triggers" - someone who reacts to cigarette smoke, for instance, may not react to dust from animals.

What should you do if you suspect you have occupational asthma? Talk to your GP. If he or she suspects you have occupational asthma, you can be referred to a specialist. If a diagnosis of occupational asthma is made early enough, simple changes to your workplace can cure your asthma - in the case of Van, he was given a job in a different area of the bakery and his asthma got better.

For more information, contact the Asthma Foundation of NSW (02) 9906 3233.

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.