

Cannabis dust can cause work-related asthma

Attention: Workers in the legalized cannabis industry with exposure to cannabis dust are at risk for developing asthma.

Real evidence — Real lives.

Exposure to cannabis dust at work can cause asthma or exacerbate it.

In 2022, a 27 year-old employee collapsed and died from occupational asthma following inhalation exposure to cannabis dust while working in the pre-roll area at a state-licensed facility in Holyoke, Massachusetts.¹ She had previously worked in the flower-production area.

In addition, respiratory symptoms have been documented in cannabis production workers,² and research has identified cases of work-related asthma associated with cannabis dust in Washington state.^{3,4}

Are you being exposed to cannabis dust?

If you work in cannabis production, processing, or other jobs that involve handling cannabis materials, you are more likely than not to be exposed to cannabis dust. Other jobs that encounter cannabis exposure include lab workers, law enforcement, and social service workers.

Cannabis dust is generated during chopping, grinding, sifting, trimming, weighing, packing, and even when cleaning dusty facilities and transporting product. If you inhale enough cannabis dust, it can increase your chances for respiratory symptoms or asthma.

Important facts about asthma.

- Asthma is a lung disease. Symptoms include wheezing, cough, chest tightness, and shortness of breath.



Working with dried cannabis materials can release potentially hazardous dust.

- If you have never had asthma, you can still develop it. For some people, asthma develops after exposure to a substance over a period of weeks or years; for others all it takes is one sudden high-dose exposure.
- If you already have asthma, you may find your symptoms are aggravated by workplace exposures.
- You can develop work-related asthma whether or not you consume cannabis.
- It is not possible to 'toughen up' your lungs to resist the toxic effect of cannabis dust.
- In addition to the cannabis dust, you may be exposed to other asthma-causing substances such as mold, pesticides, ozone, cleaning chemicals, and soil components like diatomaceous earth.



Stay healthy to stay working.

Fatal exposures are rare; however, developing workplace asthma from cannabis dust can have a big impact on your livelihood. For example, you may need to look for another job in order to avoid exposure.

If you experience asthma-like symptoms at work:

- Tell your employer so they can address cannabis dust safety. For example, this may prompt them to evaluate and improve ventilation to reduce dust.
- See a doctor — look for one who specializes in occupational medicine.
- Share this hazard alert with your employer and doctor.

If you are removed from exposure early enough, your breathing problems are less likely become permanent and you'll start to feel healthy again.

If ventilation is inadequate, ask your employer to allow you to voluntarily use an N95 respirator. If you use it correctly, it can protect so you're less likely to get asthma. Facial hair will cause leaks where the N95 seals to your face. So no stubble or beards!

Employers — Get help now!

L&I is here to help you improve workplace safety for cannabis dust and other possible hazards.

For example, you can get free and confidential professional, technical assistance for ventilation improvements and respiratory protection.

Contact DOSH consultation at www.Lni.wa.gov/SafetyConsultants for scheduling.

Resources

L&I's [Cannabis Safety Page](#) provides rules for Washington state employers along with training and hazard prevention resources.

[Guide to worker safety and health in the Marijuana industry \(2017, pdf\)](#), by the Colorado Department of Public Health, provides useful safety ideas but doesn't include Washington state's rules for employers.

References

1. OSHA Inspection #1572011. www.osha.gov/ords/imis/establishment.inspection_detail?id=1572011.015.
2. Beckman S, CE Langer, MB Schenker (2023) A pilot study of respiratory and dermal symptoms in California cannabis cultivation workers. *Journal of Agromedicine*, 28:1, 28-35. doi:10.1080/1059924X.2022.2141407.
3. Sack C, N Ghodsian, K Janse, B Silvey and CD Simpson (2020) Allergic and respiratory symptoms in employees of indoor cannabis grow facilities. *Ann Work Expo Health*, 64(7):754-764. doi:10.1093/annweh/wxaa050.
4. Reeb-Whitaker C, CR LaSee, DK Bonauto (2022) Surveillance of work-related asthma including the emergence of a cannabis-associated case series in Washington State. *Journal of Asthma*, 59:8, 1537-1547. doi:10.1080/02770903.2021.1955379.

This alert is intended to bring awareness to potential safety and health hazards in the workplace. It is not a rule and creates no new legal obligations. L&I recommends employers and workers review the safety and health rules for specific requirements at www.Lni.wa.gov/SafetyRules.

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