

Are you exposed to dust, fumes or gases while at work?

# Healthy Lungs at Work

If your work environment is dusty, such as a construction site, mine, quarry or factory, or you are exposed to fumes or gases, you should be concerned about your lung health. While you may have been told that it's part of the job, that's not the case. Find out what you and your employer can do in your work environment to protect you and your mates' lung health at work.

## Breathing in dust, fumes or gases does matter

Most of us take breathing for granted. But when you breathe in hazardous dust, fumes or gases every day, it can make a difference to your health, now and in the future. Exposure to hazardous agents can cause lung disease. If you have a pre-existing lung condition like asthma, it may make it worse.

Depending on the hazardous agents:

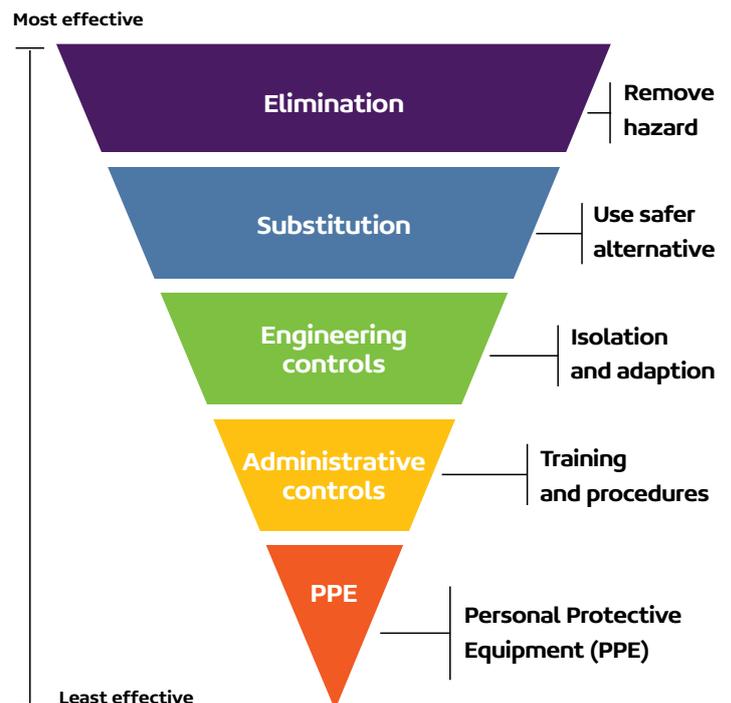
- You may experience **immediate health effects**, such as shortness of breath, cough and chest tightness after breathing in a strong irritant like ammonia or chlorine.
- You may develop a condition such as pneumoconiosis (black lung disease or silicosis), Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease or hypersensitivity pneumonitis, **after months or years of work**.
- You may develop certain lung cancers or an asbestos-related condition, such as asbestosis or mesothelioma (a type of cancer caused by exposure to asbestos), **long after you have left the job**.

We spend a significant proportion of our day at work. While at work, you will breathe in almost 8,000 times. That's 8,000 opportunities to breathe in hazardous agents.

## What you and your employer can do at work

In Australia, you and your lung health are protected by Workplace Health and Safety legislation. Your employer must ensure that the highest possible standards are in

place to protect your lung health. To achieve this, every workplace must follow strict procedures to control your risk. This is known as the Hierarchy of Controls.



Ensure you use PPE that is specifically designed for the hazardous agent you're working with – you may need training in how to use it, including cleaning and maintenance, as well as to undergo fit-testing.

For masks, ensure there's a proper seal around your nose and mouth.

You can help by:

- Reading the Safety Data Sheet (SDS) and Safe Work Method Statement (SWMS)
- Staying aware of the industry standards in your state or territory.

## What you can do yourself

- **Quit smoking.** Smoking or vaping of any kind, including tobacco, e-liquids or other drugs, increases your risk of many lung diseases, so the sooner you quit, the better.
- **Practice good hygiene.** Wash your hands and face before eating and drinking and put any dusty clothes in a separate wash basket.
- **Talk to your doctor.** Have regular check-ups with your doctor, even if you aren't experiencing any symptoms.

Even if you smoke, you should still protect your lung health at work.

## What to talk to your doctor about

- At your regular check-ups with your doctor, tell them:
  - Where you work
  - The conditions you work under, including use of the Hierarchy of Controls
  - Your role and proximity to the hazardous agents
  - About the hazardous agents – take the SDS or SWMS with you
  - If you vape or smoke tobacco or other drugs.

When your doctor is armed with this information, they can better monitor your lung health and overall wellbeing.

If you are experiencing any **changes in your breathing** or have developed a **cough**, talk to your doctor as soon as you can.

- Tell your doctor:
  - When you experience symptoms
  - How long you've had the symptoms for
  - If you've had time off work because of your symptoms
  - If your workmates are experiencing symptoms.

## Health monitoring in the workplace

If you work with certain [hazardous agents](#), you are required to undergo health monitoring under Workplace Health and Safety legislation. In some industries, your employer must organise it and cover the costs. Health monitoring is conducted by a registered medical practitioner and involves examination and ongoing monitoring to see if the agents you are exposed to are affecting your health.

If you raise an issue about hazardous agents with your employer and a resolution cannot be reached, contact the Workplace Health and Safety Regulator in your state or territory, or talk to your local Union or Workplace Health and Safety representative.



## FURTHER INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

Contact Lung Foundation Australia for more information, to access our support services and join our mailing list for regular updates and latest news.

### Lung Foundation Australia Services

- Information and Support Team
- Lung disease information resources
- Education webinars
- Lung Cancer and Respiratory Support Nurses
- Support groups
- Peer-to-peer connections
- Referral to pulmonary rehabilitation and Lungs in Action exercise programs
- E-Newsletter

### External Links

- Safe Work Australia  
<https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/>
- European Lung Foundation (ELF):  
<https://www.europeanlung.org/en/>

[Lungfoundation.com.au](https://lungfoundation.com.au) | Freecall 1800 654 301 | [enquiries@lungfoundation.com.au](mailto:enquiries@lungfoundation.com.au)

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