



# Asthma and Cleaning Products

## *What Workers Need to Know*

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In collaboration with the NH Department of Health and Human Services

*Cleaning products are used in all workplaces and can cause or trigger work-related asthma. Employers should make sure the safest products and practices are used so that people do not get asthma from work.*

**Never mix  
cleaners!**

**Mixing bleach  
and ammonia  
or mixing  
bleach and  
acid creates  
poisonous  
fumes.**



### What is work-related asthma?

Asthma is a chronic (long-term) inflammatory disorder where the flow of air may be decreased, making it hard to breathe. Symptoms of asthma include: cough, wheezing, chest tightness, shortness of breath, and difficulty breathing.

Asthma is considered work-related when it is caused or made worse by something at work. Even small exposures to certain substances can cause or trigger asthma. Symptoms may start right after you breathe in the substance or may

start hours after leaving work. Sometimes a person can suddenly develop work-related asthma from chemicals they have worked with for years.



### Can cleaning products cause asthma?

YES, they can!

You might not expect it, but cleaning products used at work can cause asthma or make your asthma worse. Workers who use cleaners regularly can get asthma.

Cleaning products are used by all sorts of workers, like janitors, office workers, and hospital workers. We need cleaners to clean, disinfect, and control dust and mold on surfaces. Some people who work with these cleaners, or work in areas where cleaners are used, can get breathing problems.

### Who can be affected?

Here are some jobs where you might be exposed to cleaning products:

#### Types of Jobs

- Health Care Worker
- Hotel maintenance
- Housekeeper

- Janitor
- Maid
- Office worker
- Restaurant worker
- Teacher

#### Types of Cleaners

- Carpet cleaner
- Disinfectant
- Floor wax stripper
- Glass cleaner
- Tile cleaner
- Toilet cleaner

## Case Reports

**A hotel housekeeper** was asked to use a muriatic acid (hydrochloric acid) tile cleaner to clean ceramic tile floors in a hotel bathroom. She was told by her supervisor to dilute the cleaner with water, but was not given more specific instructions. While using the acid cleaner she started coughing and became short of breath. She went to a doctor two days later when her symptoms became worse. She was diagnosed with work-related asthma.



She lost a month of work because of this incident.

**A cleaning contractor** with a long history of asthma mixed a chlorine-based cleaner with an ammonia-based cleaner to clean an office bathroom. She immediately began having breathing problems (wheezing, cough, and shortness of breath). She considered working through the day but her symptoms got worse and she was admitted to the local hospital. Since this incident, she has become more aware of what triggers her asthma and avoids working with certain products.

## How can I avoid getting sick from using cleaning products?

- ◆ Read warning labels and follow them.
- ◆ Read the SDS (Safety Data Sheet) for the products you work with.
- ◆ Wear goggles to protect your eyes when using caustic cleaners.
- ◆ Wear gloves to protect your skin.
- ◆ Do not use a cleaner at full strength when the instructions say to dilute it with water.
- ◆ Do not mix cleaning products.
- ◆ Be careful in small rooms and where there is poor ventilation.
- ◆ Store cleaners in their original containers.
- ◆ Leave windows and doors open, or use a fan to circulate the air.
- ◆ Carefully handle leftover cleaner in buckets, on rags and sponges.
- ◆ Dust masks will not prevent you from breathing vapors from cleaners.
- ◆ Use less toxic cleaners whenever possible.

### Resources:

Breathe NH <http://www.breathenh.org/>

NH Asthma Control Program

<http://www.dhhs.nh.gov/dphs/cdpc/asthma>

NH Occupational Health Surveillance Program

<http://www.dhhs.nh.gov/dphs/hsdm/ohs>

American Lung Association [www.lung.org/workplacewellness](http://www.lung.org/workplacewellness)

OSHA Occupational Asthma

<https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/occupationalasthma/index.html>

Northern New England Poison Center 1-800-222-1222

Safer cleaning chemicals and disinfectants

<http://www.greenseal.org/FindGreenSealProductsAndServices.aspx>

<http://www.epa.gov/pesticides/regulating/labels/design-dfe-pilot.html>

<http://www.informedgreensolutions.org>

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