

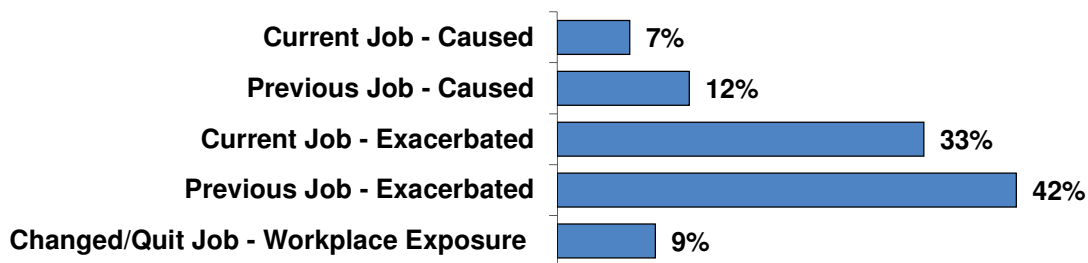
Background

Work-related asthma is a lung disease caused or made worse by exposures to substances in the workplace and may result in long-term lung damage, loss of work days, disability and possibly death. Exposure to animals, dust, chemicals, mold, and plants can trigger asthma symptoms which may begin at work or several hours after leaving work.¹ Those who have never had asthma can develop asthma due to workplace exposures and people who previously have had asthma may find their symptoms worsen due to workplace exposures. Both situations are considered work-related asthma.¹

Workplace Exposure

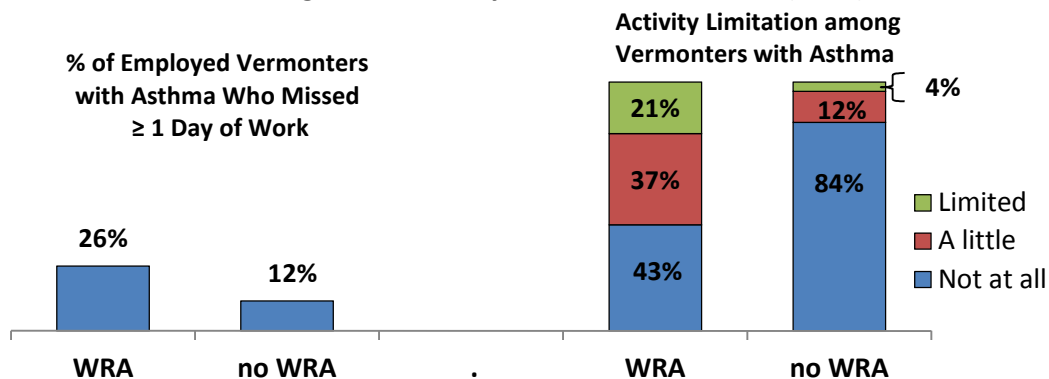
In 2014, 7% of Vermont adults with current asthma indicated that they believe their asthma was caused by chemicals, smoke, fumes, or dust at their current workplace and 12% indicated their asthma was caused by a previous job.³ Another 33% stated that their asthma was made worse by these factors in their current job and 42% experienced aggravation of their asthma in a previous job. Among adults with current asthma, 9% reported quitting a job due to workplace factors that caused their asthma or made it worse. Overall, 66% of Vermont adults with current asthma reported work-related asthma.

Asthma and Workplace Exposure, ACBS 2014



Vermonters with work-related asthma were more likely to miss work and experience activity limitation due to their asthma than those without work-related asthma. Twenty-six percent of Vermont adults with work-related asthma reported missing work in the past year due to their asthma compared to 12% of those whose asthma was not work related. In addition, Vermonters with work-related asthma experienced asthma symptoms on twice as many days compared to those without work-related asthma (9.7 versus 4.4 days/month). On average Vermonters with current asthma that was work related missed an average of 2.7 days of work in the past year due to their asthma compared to 0.3 days per year for Vermonters whose asthma was not work-related.

Burden of Asthma among Vermonters by Work-Related Asthma (WRA) Status, ACBS 2014

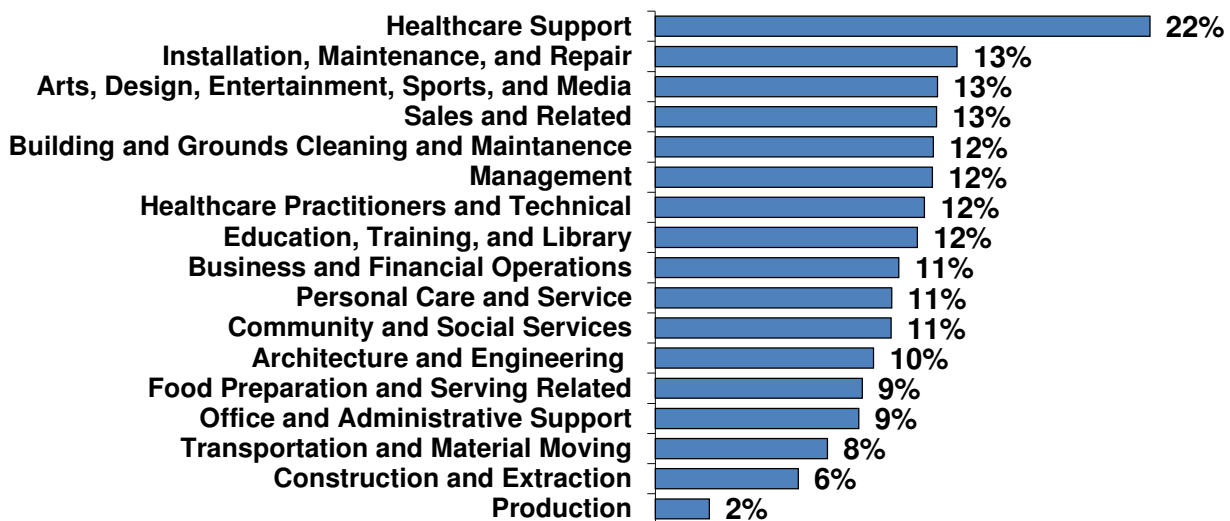


Among smokers the rate of work-related asthma was 89% compared to 62% among nonsmokers. Despite the high percentage of adults who reported issues with workplace exposures and asthma exacerbation (66% of adults with asthma), only 15% had told a doctor they believed their asthma was related to work and 9% had actually been told by a doctor that their asthma was related to their work. Twenty-one percent of adults with current asthma reported discussing with their health care provider whether their asthma may be work related.

Asthma Prevalence by Occupation

In 2014, the prevalence of current asthma in Vermont varied from 2% to 22% across categories of occupations.² Asthma prevalence among those working in healthcare support occupations was significantly higher at 22% compared to the statewide average of 11%. An estimated 1,600 Vermonters with asthma work in healthcare support occupations. This category of occupations includes nursing, psychiatric, and home health aides, occupational and physical therapist assistants and aides, massage therapists, dental assistants, medical assistants, medical transcriptionists, pharmacy aides, veterinary assistants and laboratory animal caretakers, phlebotomists, and all other healthcare support workers including medical equipment preparers.

Current Asthma Prevalence by Category of Occupation, BRFSS 2014



Note: There were too few respondents working in computer & mathematical; farming, fishing, & forestry; legal; life, physical, and social science; military specific, or protective service occupations to report prevalence.

Discussion

Proper diagnosis and treatment of work-related asthma, in addition to minimizing exposure to irritants at work, can lead to better health, improved quality of life, and increased productivity at work. Those with uncontrolled asthma are encouraged to speak with their healthcare provider to discuss whether their asthma may be work-related. Additionally, the Vermont Department of Labor offers resources to employers to maintain safe working standards through its Project WorkSAFE program. These services are free and confidential to Vermont small businesses. For more information and other asthma resources, contact the Asthma Program at the Vermont Department of Health, 802-952-0256.

Tips for Controlling Asthma at Work⁴

1. Reduce exposure to allergens or irritants that cause asthma symptoms.
 - Eliminate sources of unhealthy air; request improved ventilation
 - Use safer cleaning products whenever possible
 - Use safer chemicals and machinery
 - Use respiratory protective gear to avoid exposure to workplace hazards
 - Avoid tobacco smoke
2. Get help from your healthcare provider for your breathing problems.
3. Report respiratory symptoms immediately as well as breakdowns in ventilation or protective equipment to your employer (your co-workers may also be at risk).
4. Take care of your asthma. See your health care provider regularly, take medications as directed, and avoid exposures that worsen your asthma.

Resources to Reduce the Burden of Asthma among Working Vermonters

- ① Do You Have Work-Related Asthma? OSHA Fact Sheet:
<https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3707.pdf>
- ② Project WorkSAFE: Free resources and consultations available through the Vermont Department of Labor to improve workplace safety:
<http://labor.vermont.gov/project-worksafe/>
- ③ Work-Related Asthma Factsheet:
<http://labor.vermont.gov/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/Work-Related-Asthma-Factsheet.pdf>
- ④ American Lung Association- Guide to Controlling Asthma at Work:
<http://www.lung.org/lung-health-and-diseases/lung-disease-lookup/asthma/living-with-asthma/creating-asthma-friendly-environments/guide-to-controlling-asthma-at-work.html?referrer=https://www.google.com/>

For additional resources regarding work-related asthma and resources regarding trigger reduction, asthma education, and improving asthma control, please contact:

Vermont Asthma Program at the Vermont Department of Health

Phone: 802-951-0156 or **Email:** vdhco@vermont.gov

Website: <http://healthvermont.gov/prevent/asthma/index.aspx>

Data Sources and References

- ¹ OSHA Fact Sheet, Do You Have Work-Related Asthma? DTSEM FS-3707 03/2014, <https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3707.pdf>
- ² Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2014
- ³ Asthma Call Back Survey, Adult 2014
- ⁴ American Lung Association. Guide to controlling asthma at work. <http://www.lung.org/lung-health-and-diseases/lung-disease-lookup/asthma/living-with-asthma/creating-asthma-friendly-environments/guide-to-controlling-asthma-at-work.html?referrer=https://www.google.com/>

For More Information on Asthma Data

Asthma Surveillance: http://healthvermont.gov/research/asthma/asthma_surv.aspx

Maria Roemhildt, PhD, Research, Epidemiology & Evaluation, Vermont Department of Health

Phone: 802-951-4076, maria.roemhildt@vermont.gov