



How To Contract for Products That Do Not Cause or Aggravate Asthma

How do I know which chemicals are asthmagens?

Asthmagens are chemicals known to cause asthma in a person who never had asthma prior to exposure. The Association of Occupational and Environmental Clinics (AOEC) has compiled a list of asthmagens through a grant from the National Institutes of Occupational Safety and Health. You can view this list or search for a specific chemical on the web at <http://www.aoec.org/aoeccode.htm>. Chemicals that are asthmagens are listed with the Exposure Code "A."

Does using a product that contains an asthmagen mean I will get asthma?

Not necessarily. However, it is wise to be precautionary and avoid using products containing asthmagens wherever possible. For some chemicals, there have been numerous reported cases of occupational asthma. For other chemicals, only a few cases of occupational asthma have been documented in the entire population of people who work with them. In addition, some people are more susceptible than others.

It is important to note that some chemicals known to cause occupational asthma have caused documented cases only in certain settings or through certain uses. For instance, tall oil, which is identified as an asthmagen in the AOEC database and is found in some floor finishes, is documented to have caused occupational asthma in someone exposed while working in a rubber-tire manufacturing plant where tall oil was heated to over 250° C. No cases of occupational asthma are documented to have been caused by tall oil in floor finishes.¹

If for some reason a substitute cannot be found and you use a product containing an asthmagen, be aware of any respiratory problems you have and report them promptly to a health care professional.

How do I know in which settings a particular asthmagen has caused asthma?

If you are concerned about a chemical on the list, and want to know in what settings it has caused occupational asthma, you may want to contact the AOEC or consult an industrial hygienist. You can also look in the scientific literature yourself by searching for the chemical name plus the word "asthma" in the Medline Database at <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi>.

Which chemicals are respiratory irritants?

Respiratory irritants are chemicals that can bring on an asthma attack in someone who has previously suffered from asthma. There is no recognized list of respiratory irritants. However, a product's material safety data sheet should indicate whether the product is a respiratory irritant. Look for phrases like:

- May irritate the respiratory tract.
- May aggravate respiratory ailments.
- Overexposure may cause wheezing.

How do I know which products contain asthmagens or respiratory irritants?

The best way to obtain this information through a purchasing contract is to require vendors to disclose it in the bid specifications. Although all hazardous ingredients should be listed on the material safety data sheet (MSDS), there is no enforcement of accuracy standards for MSDSs. Since a purchasing contract is a legal document, and penalties can be imposed if bidders do not provide accurate information, this can provide an extra level of reliability.

Bid language can include:

Please provide information as to whether this product contains any chemical known to cause asthma. [A list of asthmagens can be provided or bidders could be referred to the AOEC list.]

Please provide information as to whether this product contains any chemical known to be a respiratory irritant or to aggravate existing respiratory ailments.

If disclosure is not required during bidding:

The vendor can be required to provide asthagen information to the product user when the product is purchased through a contract. The contract can then state:

Vendor must provide information to the purchaser at the time of purchase identifying any ingredients that may cause asthma or a respiratory hazard.

Are there examples of purchasers requesting this information through the procurement process?

Yes. The State of Massachusetts requested information on asthmagens in its 2003 janitorial cleaners bid. A copy of the bid document is available at <ftp://ftp.comm-pass.com/Data/0140800006.pdf>. More information on this contract is available at http://www.comm-pass.com/Comm-PASS/Scripts/xdoc_view.idc?doc_id=014080&key_xx=.

Are there lists of products that do not contain asthmagens?

INFORM has compiled fact sheets on alternatives to a variety of products including cleaners, pressed wood products, restroom deodorizer blocks, spray lubricants, buses, and industrial markers.

Tell your vendor about your concerns and ask if he/she can help you find an asthagen-free alternative for the product you require.

What if I cannot find a substitute?

Make sure you minimize exposure to the chemical by using it only when necessary, using it when fewer people are in the building, or using it with ventilation. It might also be wise to consult an industrial hygienist on the proper personal protection equipment to use when working with a product containing an asthagen. If you start having respiratory symptoms while using the chemical, stop using it and consult a health care professional immediately.

¹ S.M. Tarlo, "Occupational asthma induced by tall oil in the rubber tyre industry," *Clinical and Experimental Allergy*, Jan. 1992, vol. 22, no. 1, 99-101.