

Occupational Lung Disease – Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)



Occupational lung diseases are conditions of the respiratory system caused by workplace exposure to dusts, gases, fumes, vapours, mists and microorganisms.

What is chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)?

COPD is an umbrella term for a group of progressive lung conditions which include:

- emphysema
- chronic bronchitis
- chronic asthma.

Around 20 per cent of people with COPD also have asthma.

COPD is preventable and treatable and is characterised by chronic obstruction of lung airflow that interferes with normal breathing and is not fully reversible.

People with COPD may experience cough, sputum production and difficult or laboured breathing.

What causes chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)?

There are many causes of COPD and it is likely a combination of environmental exposure and genetic predisposition.

Who is at risk of COPD?

As COPD is a common disease, there are many risk factors, including exposure to dusts, gases, fumes, vapours, mists and microorganisms.

Risk factors include:

- smoking
- being exposed to passive smoking.
- being exposed to dusts, pollution and fumes, chemical fumes and toxic substances, and
- having a pre-existing infection such as tuberculosis.

COPD is a common lung condition that affects both men and women. Around 1 in 7 Australians aged 40 years and over have some form of COPD, although around half of those people do not know they have the condition. (<https://lungfoundation.com.au/patients-carers/living-with-a-lung-disease/copd/overview/>)



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What you must do as a person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU)

PCBUs must eliminate the risks of dusts, gases, fumes, vapours mists and microorganisms. If this is not reasonably practicable, PCBUS must minimise the risks so far as is reasonably practicable.

Under the model WHS laws, amongst other things, as a PCBU you have duties to:

- identify the hazard
- control the risk of exposure
- if there is a workplace exposure standard (WES), ensure it is not exceeded
- if there is a WES and you are not certain the airborne concentration exceeds the exposure standard, conduct air monitoring
- provide health monitoring for workers who have been exposed or are at risk of exposure to hazards.

References:

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/chronic-respiratory-conditions/copd/contents/copd>
<https://lungfoundation.com.au/patients-carers/living-with-a-lung-disease/copd/overview/>
<https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/copd>

Further information:

Under the model WHS Regulations, PCBUs have specific duties to eliminate exposure to hazards that can cause occupational lung diseases, such as COPD, at the workplace. If this is not reasonably practicable, exposure must be minimised so far as is reasonably practicable. Contact your [WHS regulator](#) to find out the laws that apply in your state or territory.