

Workplace asthma 'costing UK over £100m a year'

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Respiratory health experts at the University of Birmingham have found that the cost to the UK economy of workplace asthma may be as high as £135 million a year, and that the costs are mostly borne by the patient and the taxpayer with only three per cent falling to the employer.

Professor Jon Ayres, of the University's Institute of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, led a collaborative study funded by the UK Health and Safety Executive estimating the total cost of workplace asthma. The other partners were Metroeconomica at the University of Bath and the Institute of Occupational Medicine in Edinburgh.

The team's results allowed them to calculate the costs of workplace asthma taking into consideration work loss as well as their use of health services. They used six scenarios, including developing asthma after exposure to common workplace sources including isocyanates – found in some paints and laminates; latex and flour.

The researchers assessed the financial impact on the individual, the employer and the state. They calculated the actual gross cost to lie between £70-£100 million per year (based on 2004 prices). However, their findings add: 'Given that the number of newly diagnosed cases is likely to be underestimated by at least one third, these costs may be as large as £95-£135 million.'

Their paper 'Costs of Occupational Asthma in the UK' concludes: 'At present there is relatively little financial incentive for employers to intervene to reduce the number of new cases of occupational asthma, despite the fact that significant benefits would accrue to the rest of society.'

Professor Ayres commented: 'These findings are both remarkable and worrying. Occupational asthma is an almost entirely preventable disease and these findings show that efforts need to increase to prevent the development of new cases. This requires collaboration between employers, employees and occupational health workers.'

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Notes to editors

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