

LIFE'S WORK

Sickened by the Office (Really)

By LISA BELKIN
Published: May 1, 2008

FOR Patty Mulcahy, it began with itchy eyes. They started to water two years ago when renovation began on the Midtown office building where she was working as an assistant at a television network. By the fifth day, after 30,000 square feet of new carpeting had been glued in place, the redness and swelling became unbearable. She ended up in the emergency room.



Daniel Horowitz

Over the next three months, she developed a bad cough. Doctors at first suspected pneumonia, but it worsened in spite of antibiotics. When she collapsed at her desk in October 2006, barely able to breathe, she learned she had what doctors call "occupational asthma."

In other words, she was allergic to work.

This time of year there is a lot of sneezing and coughing in the workplace — spring is allergy season. But for some, the cause of the misery is not what's outside, but what's within.

While it sounds like a punch line, or a handy excuse for avoiding the office, workplace allergy, specifically occupational asthma, accounts for about 10 percent of asthma cases in the United States, according to the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology.

Occupational asthma alone is estimated to be responsible for 24.5 million missed workdays nationwide annually, said

Dr. Karin Pacheco, an occupational medicine specialist at the National Jewish Medical and Research Center in Denver, which specializes in respiratory illness.

Work-induced allergy is fairly simple to diagnose: the symptoms worsen as the workday progresses, and lessen after you leave. And you feel fine on weekends and vacations.

Much more complicated is what to *do* about it. The only cure is to avoid the allergy trigger. That may be possible when your trigger is peanuts, but how do you earn a living when your trigger is the place you work?

An allergic reaction is an overreaction of the immune system, causing everything from rashes to life-threatening anaphylactic shock. Sometimes the reaction occurs the first time a substance is encountered, but allergies more commonly develop after repeated exposure.

Although even immunologists use the terms allergy and sensitivity interchangeably, there is a difference. Allergic sensitivity means an allergy to a specific allergen like ragweed; sensitivity refers to a nonspecific irritant. The headache you get after being exposed to

COMMENTS (13)

E-MAIL

PRINT

REPRINTS

SAVE

SHARE



More Articles in Fashion & Style »

Great Getaways - Travel Deals by E-Mail

Sign up for travel offers from NYTimes.com's premier advertisers. See Sample grimes@habitats.com [Change E-mail Address](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)



MOST POPULAR

1. David Brooks: Combat and Composure
2. Unboxed: Can You Become a Creature of New Habits?
3. For the Elderly, Being Heard About Life's End
4. Lots of Animals Learn, but Smarter Isn't Better
5. Bob Herbert: Doing the Troops Wrong
6. Thomas L. Friedman: Who Will Tell the People?
7. Sidebar: In One Flaw, Questions on Validity of 46 Judges
8. If You Use Outlook E-Mail, Meet Xobni
9. It's Florida. It's Hiaasen. It's Golf?
10. Books of The Times: A Challenge for the U.S.: Sun Rising on the East

[Go to Complete List »](#)

pungent room freshener, for instance, indicates a sensitivity to an irritant, while the swelling of your throat when you eat shrimp is an allergic response. In other words, an allergy can kill while a sensitivity just makes you miserable.

Nearly every workplace has potential triggers. The [Mayo Clinic](#) Web site (mayoclinic.com) lists 16 professions at risk for occupational asthma, including veterinarian (exposure to dander), cabinet maker (wood dust), cleaning staff (disinfectants), baker (dust from flour and grain) and hairdresser (chemicals and fumes).

The [Occupational Safety and Health Administration](#) (osha.gov) has guidelines for handling these and other substances, and masks, ventilation systems and exposure rotations go a long way toward reducing allergies at work. But some people suffer even with the best of practices.

Severe allergies fall under the Americans with Disabilities Act, which requires employers to make reasonable changes in the workplace to enable an employee to do the job. And allergies developed at work often fall under workers' compensation laws. But both routes can be complex and capricious, and redress is often dependent on the attitude of the employer.

Mark Strikwerda, 55, said that his employer, the North County Fire Protection District in Fallbrook, Calif., did all it could to help him. He began fighting fires 32 years ago and was healthy until March 2005, when, following a particularly smoky blaze, he developed what he called "the worst sore throat." The throat pain ebbed, he said, but he was left with a cough he could not shake. By June, he appeared so ill that firehouse medics drove him to a hospital, where the oxygen level in his blood was found to be low.

After being told he had occupational asthma, Mr. Strikwerda spent nine months on paid disability, trying to find a medical regimen that would return him to work. Eventually he took an office job with the fire department, but not only is he not permitted to fight fires, he cannot even stand near the idling trucks: exhaust undoes him.

While he describes his job as "a gift, and I'm grateful for it," he said that a firefighter who can't fight fires is like "a thoroughbred who isn't allowed to run." He plans to retire soon.

Other employers are not quite as accommodating. An investment banker in Washington, who asked for anonymity for fear of being seen as "difficult" by future employers, described in an e-mail message the months he spent sneezing in a dank basement office.

"Soon I felt lightheaded and wheezy," he wrote. "People coming into my office would comment that something wasn't right about the air quality. Then for five days straight I had a bloody nose, ultimately warranting a visit to the ear, nose and throat doctor."

His constant complaints inspired the installation of another filter on the ventilation system, which improved the situation somewhat. After he left the job, he wrote, "the company deemed my old office uninhabitable and no one has worked there since."

Conflicts over work-related irritants and allergens can end up in court. Last July, Susan McBride, who works in the planning department of the City of Detroit, sued the city in United States District Court for violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Ms. McBride, her lawsuit says, suffers from severe migraines, dizziness, nausea, earaches and sinus and breathing problems when exposed to strong scents, and she regularly became ill at work when a colleague arrived wearing perfume. The colleague refused to stop spritzing (though she did agree to unplug an air freshener) and the women's bosses refused to ban scents in the office.

The case created a burst of comment on Web sites like overlawyered.com and

The New York TimesTRAVEL
nytimes.com/travel



Surf fever in Peru

Also in Travel:

- [On a budget in a town that Oprah calls home](#)
- [Exotic destinations for Mother's Day](#)
- [A weekend in Athens, Greece](#)

ADVERTISEMENTS

All the news that's fit to personalize.

In a world of second opinions, get the facts first.

The blog that covers all things Oscar



Ads by Google

what's this?

Intel and Cray Alliance

See how Intel and Cray are building the supercomputers of the future!

www.Intel.com/xeon

breathefreordie.com. The chatter on Overlawyered tended to suggest that Ms. McBride was an example of all that is wrong with the legal system; Breathe Free respondents seemed inclined toward canonizing her. Dozens of workers contacted her lawyer, Ann Curry Thompson, who is now bringing similar suits in Texas and Ohio.

Ms. Thompson said Ms. McBride is still going to work, armed with antihistamines, painkillers and inhalers. No trial date has been set.

As for Ms. Mulcahy, she wore a mask at the office, hoping for a return to good health when the dust literally settled. But she still coughed, and when she requested an air quality test and asked whether the ventilation system was clogged, “they started treating me like a potential lawsuit, giving me bad reviews and sending me for meetings with H.R.,” Ms. Mulcahy said.

So she left in February for an office that does not make her cough as often, though she knows that as a general rule, once allergic is always allergic. “I still can’t go into a restaurant with candles, or walk by the horses in Central Park,” she said. “For the rest of my life I’ll be reminded of that one job.”

[More Articles in Fashion & Style »](#)

[Need to know more? 50% off home delivery of The Times.](#)

Tips

To find reference information about the words used in this article, double-click on any word, phrase or name. A new window will open with a dictionary definition or encyclopedia entry.

Past Coverage

[NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: SOUTH BRONX; Trees They Want, But No Boys Allowed \(May 20, 2007\)](#)
[The Wheezing That Could Signal Childhood Asthma \(May 1, 2007\)](#)
[Gail G. Shapiro, 59, Allergist Who Studied Child Treatments \(September 8, 2006\)](#)
[VITAL SIGNS: CAUSE AND EFFECT; Dogs on Notice in Asthmatic Households \(September 5, 2006\)](#)

Related Searches

[Allergies](#)
[Asthma](#)

[Add Alert](#)
[Add Alert](#)

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM

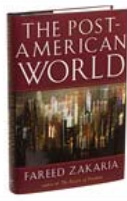


SCIENCE »



[Study Yields Surprises About a Siberian Lake](#)

BOOKS »



[A Challenge for the U.S.: Sun Rising on the East](#)

SPORTS »



[The Rail Blog: After the Derby](#)

OPINION »

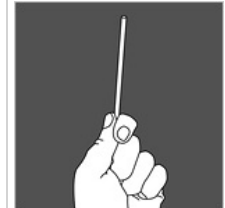
[Bloggingheads Video: A Debate on the Iranian Influence in Iraq](#)

N.Y. / REGION »



[In a Faded City, Plans to Build a Hotel Build Hope](#)

OPINION »



[Op-Ed: Tough Love in North Carolina](#)

[Home](#) | [World](#) | [U.S.](#) | [N.Y. / Region](#) | [Business](#) | [Technology](#) | [Science](#) | [Health](#) | [Sports](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Arts](#) | [Style](#) | [Travel](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Automobiles](#) | [Back to Top](#)
 Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)