

HOW TO SPOT AND PREVENT ‘OCCUPATIONAL LUNG DISEASES’

Occupational lung diseases are conditions that have been caused or made worse by inhaling substances in the work environment. In agriculture, this condition is often referred to as “farmer’s lung”. This article will talk you through the causes of farmers lung, how to recognise the symptoms, and reduce the risks to yourself and others on the farm.

If you are an employer, it is your responsibility to make sure that staff understand the risks and the short- and long-term impacts of working in a dusty environment. They should be shown how to reduce exposure. If you have any concerns about your own lung health, you should speak to your doctor.

What Causes Occupational Lung Disease on the Farm?

Dust is a part of farming life and can be found on all farms. Sources include:

- Grain harvesting and handling
- Dusts and moulds from handling livestock feeding and bedding
- Dried mud on shed floors and in tractor cabs.

Vapours and gases such as chemical and paint fumes, welding fumes, slurry fumes and fumes from some veterinary medicines can also contribute to occupational lung disease.



What are the Symptoms of Lung Disease?

Symptoms of occupational lung disease can be mild to begin with but can develop into more severe and debilitating conditions.

Short-term effects may include:

- Coughing and breathing difficulties
- Throat or nose irritation
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain or tightness

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If you are exposed to dusts and vapours at work on the farm, they may cause short term irritation, coughing and breathing problems like the ones listed above, but they may also lead to longer-term serious lung disease. Some people may develop sensitivity or even an allergy to certain substances, such as grain dust, which would mean that working with these substances would have a serious impact on their health, and may even mean that they are unable to continue working in farming.

Long-term effects may include:

- Asthma (coughing, wheezing and chest tightness)
- Chronic bronchitis (cough and phlegm production)
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (a long-term illness that makes breathing difficult)
- Farmer's lung (increasing shortness of breath and weight loss)

How to Reduce the Risk of Occupational Lung Disease

The best step to reduce the risk to yourself and others is to prevent and eliminate dusts and vapours at the source, but in the farm environment it is often not possible to do this completely. Where it is not possible to remove the hazard, control measures should be introduced. Control measures could include:

- Regularly cleaning out tractor cabs and vents to ensure a reduced dust environment.
- Installing ventilation systems over workbenches if you regularly use hazardous substances like spray paints.
- Working outdoors or in a well-ventilated shed if possible, rather than in an enclosed space.
- Regularly cleaning out dusty sheds such as grain sheds or straw barns.
- Making sure PPE (and the appropriate training on its use) is provided for all risky jobs.

PPE includes dust masks or respirators. Invest in good quality masks and ensure that there is a good fit. Masks should be maintained and filters cleaned or replaced according to the manufacturer's instructions. Have multiple masks to hand in locations where they are needed, such as at the grain shed door, or in the workshop; if they are easy to find you are far more likely to use them! Keep masks in boxes or sealed bags until you need to use them to keep them clean.

Further Information

For more information on COSHH in agriculture (including dust and fumes) see www.hse.gov.uk/agriculture/topics/coshh.htm

For information on grain dust see www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg140.pdf

