

First asthma-linked death highlights hazards at marijuana-processing plants

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A young woman working at a Massachusetts cannabis-processing facility who developed new-onset asthma and later died of a fatal asthma attack is the first such fatality in the burgeoning industry, a new report finds.

Researchers believe large amounts of allergen-laden dust created at these facilities could pose real respiratory dangers to workers.

When it comes to asthma and the danger to employees, "it is important to recognize that work in cannabis production is potentially causative," said a team led by [Dr. Virginia Weaver](#), of the U.S. Department of Labor.

In its case report, Weaver's team said the 27-year-old female employee began working at a Massachusetts cannabis cultivation and processing facility in late May of 2021.

She had no history of asthma but, according to her mother, "she developed work-related runny nose, cough and shortness of breath after 3-4 months of employment," the report found.

The woman first worked in the area where the cannabis was ground, but by Oct. 1 she'd moved to "flower production," grinding cannabis plant flowers and preparing cannabis cigarettes. Dust "visibly escaped" into the air, even though a (non-HEPA) shop vacuum was used to collect dust from the grinder.

The woman did wear an N95 mask and protective gloves while working, but as her symptoms worsened her workstation was moved to outside the grinding room.

However, on Nov. 9 she had an [asthma attack](#) that required her to be taken by EMS to a local emergency department. She recovered, and doctors prescribed an albuterol nebulizer. Later investigation indicated her nebulizer was likely used over 200 times over the next two months.

On Jan. 4, 2022, the woman told a co-worker that her shortness of breath was getting worse. Later that day, she started coughing and suffered severe shortness of breath while at her workstation. The woman went into cardiopulmonary arrest and died three days later.

Unfortunately, new-onset asthma is not unique to the Massachusetts cannabis facility, the report's authors said.

"In a study of employees at an indoor Washington [state] cannabis production facility, 13 of 31 employees had symptoms suggestive of asthma," Weaver's team wrote.

Another study conducted in that state found seven cases of [employees](#) with "work-exacerbated" asthma at cannabis facilities, and symptoms were so bad that three of the workers had to quit their jobs.

In one case, a worker experienced symptomatic asthma at one plant, quit the industry for two years, resumed work at a new cannabis facility—only to see symptoms return.

The report was published Nov. 17 in [Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report](#), a journal of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The fact that the young woman's work-related asthma was linked to her death was not surprising, the researchers said, since "fatal asthma can occur even with disease that is considered mild."

The [woman](#)'s experience should serve as a warning to employers, however.

"Multiple respiratory hazards have been identified in the cannabis cultivation and production industry," Weaver and colleagues said, adding that "occupational allergic diseases, including [asthma](#), are an emerging concern in the rapidly expanding U.S. cannabis industry."

More information: Find out more about work-related asthma at the [Occupational Safety and Health Agency](#).

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