

Improving Work-Related Health: Carcinogens and Airborne Risks

A carcinogen is an agent, substance, or exposure circumstance that raises the risk of cancer.

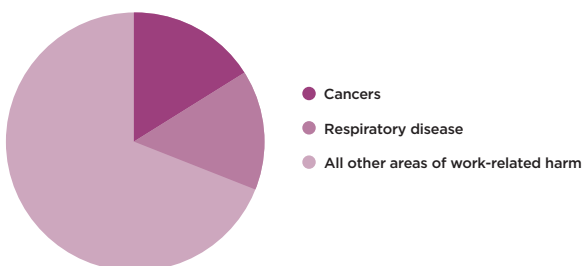
The effects of carcinogens may take many years to develop and there may be no early warning signs. Important carcinogens in New Zealand workplaces include asbestos, respirable crystalline silica, diesel engine exhaust and welding fumes.

Many work-related carcinogens affect the lungs and respiratory system. These and other airborne contaminants such as dusts, gases, vapours and fumes can also contribute to other respiratory diseases such as silicosis, asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Work-related respiratory diseases may develop over a short or long period of time.

Carcinogens and airborne contaminants are harming our workers

In New Zealand, cancers and respiratory disease account for 31% of the total burden of work-related harm and an estimated 650 deaths each year. This means cancers and respiratory disease related to work account for more fatalities than all acute injuries.

Contribution to the estimated burden of work-related harm, measured in disability-adjusted life years (DALYs)¹



Contribution to estimated annual work-related deaths²

400+

411 people are estimated to die from cancers attributable to work-related carcinogens and airborne risks each year.

200+

248 people are estimated to die from respiratory diseases attributable to work-related airborne risks each year.

What challenges do we face?



Knowledge

We need to know more about the scale, distribution and intensity of work-related exposures to carcinogens and airborne risks in New Zealand.



Capacity & capability

We need to build the capacity of expert skills and advice on work-related carcinogens and airborne risks and make these more widely available.



Effective controls

We need to support small businesses and organisations to better identify and control work-related carcinogen and airborne risks, especially smaller businesses.



Co-ordination

We need to work with and through other system actors to leverage wider influence and resources to reduce work-related carcinogens and airborne risks.

¹ WorkSafe New Zealand. (2019). Revised work-related burden of disease estimates for New Zealand.

² WorkSafe New Zealand. (2019). Work-related health estimates.

WorkSafe's actions by 2025 to prevent harm

Our aim

- Target our harm reduction efforts to the areas where they will make the biggest difference.
- Improve understanding of the reach and effectiveness of our interventions.
- Gather more detailed and accurate data on current exposures of workers to carcinogens and airborne risks.
- Build greater expertise to reduce harm from carcinogens and airborne risks.
- Improve the ability of sectors, businesses and organisations to identify, assess and control carcinogens and airborne risks.
- Identify and promote effective processes for reducing risk through elimination or substitution.
- Enable the best use of resources across the system to prevent harm.

What we'll do



Work with subject matter experts to define the priority carcinogens and airborne risks and the most effective interventions.



Engage with and learn from workers, communities, whānau, unions and iwi to understand barriers and enablers to good work-related health.



Build evaluation into our interventions and continually review new evidence and emerging risks.



Survey worker exposure to carcinogens across New Zealand industries and occupations using internationally -proven methodologies.



Evaluate the benefits of a New Zealand worker exposure database and implement recommendations from this evaluation process.



Support workforce development relevant to carcinogens and airborne risks including the professional health and safety workforce and those involved in asbestos removal, local exhaust ventilation and others.



Improve implementation of the asbestos licensing regime.



Undertake targeted workplace assessments and use enforcement tools when necessary to ensure businesses and organisations effectively manage work-related health risks.



Continue engagement, education and enforcement actions to address risks of exposure to respirable crystalline silica from engineered stone.



Make it easier for small businesses and organisations to get information about carcinogens and airborne risks, risk assessments and advice on effective controls.



Pilot a programme to offer small businesses expert support to assess and control carcinogens and airborne risks.
