Allergies Meeting Kit



WHAT'S AT STAKE

ALLERGENS AT WORK

Allergies are an issue that many people have to pay attention to every day both on and off the job. There are many sources of allergens that can cause an allergic reaction. A few of these allergens may be an issue while on the job. It is important to know what you are allergic to as well as communicating it to others in case of an exposure resulting in an emergency situation.

WHAT' S THE DANGER

ALLERGIES EXPLAINED

An allergic employee may react to chemicals in office supplies, such as the toner in a copier or printer cartridge. They may respond to the chemicals used to clean the office space. They may also be entitled to reasonable accommodation for food allergies.

Two kinds of allergic reactions affect how you respond to someone with a documented sensitivity, reports Cornell University. The **first** is a hypersensitivity or a reaction in your immune system. This immune system responds normally with symptoms of hay fever, sneezing, shortness of breath, asthma symptoms or skin/contact sensitivity.

The **second** reaction is potentially more deadly. This is anaphylactic shock – your body responds to an allergen with an antibody response that spreads through the entire body if the allergen has entered the circulatory system.

There are a wide variety of workplace allergens that could potentially impact you, including:

- Animal dander and debris
- Food allergies
- Industrial chemicals – such as solvents, bleaches, and adhesives
- Latex
- Flowers
- Perfumes and odorants
- Pollen, dust, and molds
- Wood dust and resins

While many allergy symptoms are merely inconvenient, some are life-threatening. While symptoms will vary from person to person, allergies can cause anaphylactic shock,

asthma, contact dermatitis, hives and rashes, and rhinitis (inflamed nasal passages).

The Cost of Workplace Allergies

Studies show that allergies significantly impact workplace productivity. One study reports that Americans lose 3.5 million workdays each year due to allergies. Another suggests that, even when at the office, allergy-afflicted employees are roughly 10% less productive than their healthy counterparts. Further, about nine to ten million doctors' visits each year are allergy-related, making allergy treatment a major part of out-of-pocket medical expenses.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

IMPROVE THE WORKPLACE

Identify and minimize the impact of workplace allergies. If you have life-threatening allergies, take them seriously and work with them to build an appropriate allergy response plan. For example, you might have emergency treatment options on site, such as antihistamines, inhalers, and EpiPens.

If you notice a significant increase in milder allergy symptoms, look for possible causes. You might have an unidentified mold, fungus, or ventilation problem. And while many allergic exposures are unavoidable, some relatively inexpensive modifications might improve your workplace health.

For example:

- Run the office AC system during peak allergy season (typically the spring, when many trees release pollen).
- Use HEPA air filters in the office and change them regularly.
- Take building maintenance and cleanliness seriously.
- Identify and repair water damage, reducing mold growth.
- Regularly clean desks and workspaces, reducing the amount of dust, mold, and other irritants in the office.
- Remove carpet and other absorbent materials that might collect allergens.
- Provide appropriate protective gear (such as respirators, gloves, and barrier creams) when handling industrial chemicals and other irritants.
- When possible, look for alternatives to common workplace allergens.

ENCOURAGE PROACTIVE MEDICAL TREATMENT

Many people think they know their allergic triggers, but they're often wrong or don't distinguish between a trigger and an everyday occurrence. **Misidentified allergies** can lead to ineffective treatment, increased symptoms, and decreased workplace productivity. If your employees are struggling with serious allergies, encourage them to seek treatment with an allergy specialist.

Allergy testing — combined with targeted medications and other treatment — might significantly improve their daily function.

Communicate

It is important to communicate any allergens to someone on the job who is in a management position. Proper and immediate treatment is crucial for someone suffering from a severe allergic reaction. Anaphylaxis requires immediate medical treatment, including an injection of epinephrine and a trip to a hospital emergency room. If it isn't treated properly, anaphylaxis can be fatal.

Regulatory

Any regulatory efforts should be carefully approached to ensure that the appropriate health end points are clearly identified and related to scientifically supported exposure limits.

FINAL WORD

Allergic diseases can and do occur in the workplace and exact a human and economic toll. Research into skin, pulmonary and other allergic manifestations are needed, especially well-constructed and performed studies to answer questions concerning threshold levels for initial sensitization and post-sensitization, reaction-producing levels.