

Frequently Asked Questions about Crab Asthma

1. Occupational asthma to snow crab: What is it?

Asthma is a condition that results in breathing difficulties. These breathing difficulties occur when the breathing tubes tighten up and become inflamed or swollen. Occupational asthma to snow crab is a specific type of asthma experienced by some crab processing workers that is caused by their work.

2. Is it the same as *crab asthma* or *crab lung*?

Local people have different names for occupational asthma to snow crab. These include 'crab asthma,' 'crab lung,' or 'the lung.' All of these names refer to the same thing. Some of the symptoms can be chest tightness, cough, wheeze and shortness of breath. Some workers experience these symptoms when working at the crab plant and, sometimes, after their shift is over. When these symptoms are caused by an allergy to snow crab, the worker has occupational asthma to snow crab or 'crab asthma.' We will use the name 'crab asthma' from here on in.

3. What causes crab asthma?

Crab asthma is caused by exposure to the dusts, mists, fumes or aerosols that are generated when cooking, steaming, washing, sawing, crushing, scrubbing or scraping crab in processing plants. During these activities, proteins that are in the crab may be released into the air. Once these are in the air, they can enter our lungs and breathing tubes. Some people's bodies have an abnormal response to these proteins. This abnormal response, called *sensitization*, can develop after several weeks or even years of exposure.

When sensitization occurs, the body's immune system produces special molecules, called antibodies. The antibodies attach to these crab proteins. When this happens, the body reacts and an allergic response occurs. These antibodies stay in the airways, the skin and in the blood stream for long periods of time to defend the body against future exposures to the proteins.

When crab processing workers with these antibodies come across the crab proteins again, the antibodies react and the body releases substances that cause the symptoms of asthma and allergy. Some of these symptoms can be chest tightness, wheezing, or other symptoms that you can get with crab asthma.

4. Is there a cure for crab asthma?

Right now, there is no cure for crab asthma. Once a worker has crab asthma, he or she is more likely to completely recover if they eliminate the exposure to crab as soon as possible after it develops. If they continue to process crab after they develop crab asthma, workers may develop chronic asthma that can be triggered by things away from work as well, like cold air and exercise. Some workers find their symptoms go away completely after they finish work at the plant. Some other workers may find that they continue to have breathing problems after they are laid off for the season or even after they leave the plant for good. The workers who keep working at the plant even after they have crab asthma are more likely to still have problems after the season is over or after they leave their jobs.

5. How do you know if you have crab asthma?

Crab asthma is asthma that is work related and caused by an allergy to snow crab. This makes it somewhat difficult to diagnose. For this reason, there are several tests your doctor will need to do to find out if you actually have crab asthma. These tests tell your doctor:

1. whether or not you have asthma;
2. whether or not you have an allergy to snow crab; and, if you have asthma,
3. whether or not your asthma is caused by your exposure to snow crab at work.

Many things can cause breathing problems. Not all breathing problems are caused by asthma. A medical history questionnaire gathers information about you, such as:

- what types of work you have done,
- the symptoms you have experienced,
- the medications you are or have taken, and
- whether or not other things like smoking or an allergy to cats or dogs might be causing breathing problems.

Skin tests tell your doctor whether or not you have any allergies and whether or not you have an allergy to snow crab in particular. In some cases, this questionnaire and skin test might be all your doctor needs to make a diagnosis. In other cases, however, additional tests might be needed.

6. If my test results indicate that I do not have crab asthma do I need to do anything?

Your test results may show that you have no breathing problems or allergies that are related to your work with snow crab. That is great. It means you likely don't have crab asthma, but it doesn't mean you can't develop it later. You do not need to take any action at this time. You should still watch for symptoms like runny nose, red and itchy eyes, skin rash and changes in breathing when you are working with snow crab. These

symptoms could mean you are developing an allergy to snow crab. It may take several years at work before these symptoms develop or they may never develop at all.

Now that you know more about crab asthma, if you notice signs and symptoms of allergy or asthma make sure you see your family doctor as soon as you can. If you smoke, you should consider giving this up because smoking is bad for your health. It may also increase your risk of developing crab asthma.

7. I have problems at work but I still don't know whether or not I have crab asthma. Why?

Sometimes it's hard to know for sure if working with crab is the cause for symptoms like cough, wheezing, shortness of breath, and tightness in your chest. These symptoms can be caused by a number of things. It is important to know the exact causes of your symptoms because if your symptoms are caused by smoking, allergies other than allergies to crab, or by something outside the workplace, then you may not need to consider taking any action related to your work. You might, however, need to make some other changes to your situation.

8. If I know I have crab asthma, what should I do?

The decision of what to do next is yours; however, it is recommended that if you have been diagnosed with crab asthma you should:

- follow-up with your family physician or nurse regarding appropriate treatment; and/or
- consider filing a claim with the Workplace Health, Safety and Compensation Commission;
- advise your employer of your diagnosis and discuss whether your condition can be accommodated.

9. If I stop working with crab will my symptoms go away?

The sooner you get a diagnosis and the sooner you stop working with crab, the more likely you are to completely recover. You can take medication and continue to work but if you do this, you increase the risk that your symptoms will get worse. Initially, the symptoms will usually improve over holidays, weekends and at the end of the season. Over the years, if you continue to work processing crab, your symptoms may persist and lead to a permanent disease and disability.

10. What difference does it make whether I have crab asthma or just plain asthma?

Whether you have asthma or crab asthma, you should try to reduce your exposure to the things that are causing your asthma. You should also aim to get your symptoms under control. You will be prescribed the same medications regardless of whether it is crab

asthma or just plain asthma. There are several types of medication that can be used to manage your symptoms. Anti-inflammatories, which reduce the swelling in your breathing tubes, come in a brown or red puffer or in pills. Bronchodilators, which relax the muscles around your breathing tubes and help provide short term relief from coughing, wheezing and shortness of breath, come in a blue puffer. These are called rescue medication. You may also be prescribed antihistamines to stop your runny nose, itchy eyes, etc. *It is really important to determine what's causing your symptoms.*

11. Is crab asthma contagious?

Asthma is not contagious. However, if you come home from the plant with crab on your clothes and someone in your home is very allergic to crab, they may have a reaction.

12. How do I file for workers' compensation?

To file a claim with the Workplace Health, Safety and Compensation Commission you need to complete a Form 6 "Worker's report of injury form" and send it, along with your test results, to the Commission. Form 6's are available from your employer or from the Commission via the mail (call 1-800-563-9000 to have a form mailed to you) or directly from their website www.whscc.nf.ca.

Your employer will need to complete a Form 7 and your family doctor will also send in reports to the Commission. You will be required to complete a crab asthma questionnaire and skin tests, and may be asked to complete other tests in order to qualify for benefits.

You may also be required to work with your employer to help identify suitable work that you can do given your restrictions, if any, as a result of crab asthma. Your employer is obligated by the Workplace Health, Safety and Compensation Act to provide suitable work to you, where available, and may also have a re-employment obligation to you.

13. What kinds of benefits are available from WHSCC?

If your claim is accepted, the Commission provides several different types of benefits, including:

- medical aid benefits. The Commission covers all reasonable medical costs associated with your crab asthma condition including doctor's visits and prescription drugs.
- permanent functional impairment award. This is a lump sum award that is paid to if you are permanently impaired as a result of your crab asthma.
- labour market re-entry. If you are unable to return to your pre-injury job and/or employer as a result of your crab asthma, you may be provided with a labour market re-entry assessment to determine what assistance, if any, you need to help re-enter the labour force. Labour market re-entry plans may be provided to those who need assistance.
- wage loss benefits. If you are in a wage loss situation because of your crab asthma, the Commission provides bi-weekly wage loss benefits in the amount

of 80% of your net pre-injury earnings. The maximum earnings level insured is \$45,500. Only workers that are totally disabled from the workforce are entitled to full wage loss benefits. This is not the case for most people with Crab Asthma.

14. How will crab asthma affect my ability to work?

Crab asthma will definitely affect your ability to work with or around crab. It is strongly recommended that you do not work with or around crab as your symptoms may worsen and the damage done may become permanent.

However, your employer may be able to accommodate you in another position or another area of the plant with lower or no exposure to crab. Employers have an obligation under the law to accommodate workers with disabilities where work is available.

15. If I want to know for sure whether or not I have crab asthma, what should I do?

You should consult your doctor. He or she may need to do additional tests to be sure. Some of these tests may require that you see a lung specialist.