

Occupational toxic inhalations

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THOUSANDS OF POTENTIALLY toxic agents are in daily industrial use. Recognition of occupational disease in the emergency department is made easier when affected persons are transported directly from the work site, having had an acute unprotected exposure to a known injurious substance in an industrial accident and when symptoms and signs differ from those associated with other common nonoccupational diseases. If there is a lag period between exposure and clinical illness, if potential toxins are unknown or multiple, or if the resultant illness mimics common diseases, recognition and appropriate management of acute toxic inhalations may be delayed.

Efficient diagnosis and treatment of occupational toxic inhalations will be facilitated if emergency department personnel maintain a high index of suspicion for the possibility of work-related inhalation injuries, familiarize themselves with the industrial processes and toxic substances used in local industries, maintain an adequate reference library, and obtain occupational histories from patients. Ideally, emergency department staff should make site visits to neighboring industries accompanied by an occupational hygienist. A list of toxic substances can then be compiled.