



## *Laura Steves*

WORK-EXACERBATED  
ASTHMA

*“Going back to work that fall was a nightmare. I began to get sick almost at once. The same tightness, wheezing, asthma attacks increased and I wasn’t able to take care of my son’s needs because I was so sick.”*

I'm a clinical psychologist from Fort Worth, Texas, and I've suffered from asthma and allergies for most of my life. My situation worsened about ten years ago when I was overseeing a mental health center for children and adolescents.

Like many nonprofits, we didn't have the luxury of the best in accommodations. Most of the funding we received was governmental and needless to say, as the demand for our services grew, so did the need to grow our offices. We leased a fitness center which we renovated into many offices for children and families to receive outpatient services.

The center was filthy and filled with mold. As much as we tried to make the situation better, aesthetically it look wonderful, but my asthma worsened daily. I had days where I could not breathe; I had tightening in my chest and wheezed throughout clinical meetings.

I thought I was suffering from occupational asthma. My job included home visitations filled with smokers, heavy perfume wearers and the like. I also conducted several assessment and evaluations at juvenile centers which exacerbated my conditions.

My weekends and holidays were the best of my time. My control medications seemed to help, and I was able to enjoy my time off.

I changed offices several times within the same renovated fitness center, but nothing seemed to work. I had several colleagues tell me to seek biofeedback, hypnosis and such because they felt I was having anxiety attacks. But this was not the case.

I was slowly becoming worse while at work, and the flare ups increased in duration and magnitude due to smokers and an increase in cleaning supply use

## WORK-EXACERBATED ASTHMA

- More than 25 million children and adults live with asthma all across the United States.
- Low income and minority children bear the heaviest burden of asthma, including death.
- Early childhood food allergies heighten the risk for developing asthma later in life.
- Each year, 3,000 asthma deaths occur in the United States.

Source: Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America—[www.aafa.org](http://www.aafa.org)

to alleviate my conditions. Green cleaning, an Oreck air machine, and nebulizer treatments were not helping me stay at work.

I took a leave during the last two months of pregnancy and extended my maternity once my son Spencer was born. I was out six months all together. I never felt better. I used my medications, rarely had a flare up and was enjoying all the work of being a first time mother. I could finally breathe.

Going back to work that fall was a nightmare. I began to get sick almost at once. The same tightness, wheezing, asthma attacks increased and I wasn't able to take care of my son's needs because I was so sick. I decided then that I needed to make a drastic change.

I left my role of fifteen years and decided to be a stay-at-home mom. I've contracted with my old employer as well as several other nonprofits to make ends meet. I make less than half of what I made ten years ago, but I have the flexibility of working out of my home and taking care of myself.

My two sons also suffer from allergy and exercise induced asthma. Without the proper care and control drugs, I wouldn't be able to create a future for them.

For two past years, I've served as the executive director of the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, Texas Chapter. I hope that as we continue to learn more about work-exacerbated asthma, we continue to research the many socioeconomic, demographic, and infrastructural conditions which make it such a varied disease.

*Laura Steves was a patient speaker at the ATS 2012 International Conference in San Francisco, Calif.*



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