

Musicians Who Play Wind Instruments Warned of 'Bagpipe Lung'



There are several illnesses or diseases that have come to be associated with certain professions or activities, such as black lung disease (miners), metal fume fever (welders) and mad hatter disease (hat makers). Now there's another such illness to add to this list: bagpipe lung.

A new case study from the UK is about a 61-year-old bagpiper, who died from hypersensitivity pneumonitis or HP. The chronic inflammatory lung condition was thought to have been caused by fungi growing inside his dirty bagpipes.

The condition is treatable and most musicians won't get it. But it can be deadly if it isn't treated. Dry cough is the most common symptom. Others include shortness of breath and fever.

Study author Jenny King of University Hospital of South Manchester in the UK says an allergic reaction to substances such as mold, fungi or bacteria brings on the condition, causing a patient's lungs to get stiff and making breathing difficult. The warm moist conditions inside wind instruments are perfect breeding grounds for these organisms.

Doctors diagnosed the condition in the bagpipe player and prescribed medication, but couldn't figure out the source and didn't know why his symptoms didn't improve, King says. They never asked him about wind instruments, however; the man played bagpipes daily.

When the man visited Australia for three months, leaving his bagpipes at home, his symptoms improved. But once he was back in the U.K., he resumed playing and the symptoms returned. So the doctors took samples from the bagpipes and found several species of fungi growing inside.

Sadly, it was too late. Even with treatment, the man died of respiratory complications, King says.

There have been similar reports of a saxophone player and trombone player developing HP, but recovering after cleaning their instruments.

Bottom line: Players of wind instruments, such as bagpipes, trumpets, clarinets and trombones, are at risk of getting this rare lung condition if they don't clean their instruments regularly. Anyone who plays a wind instrument should be stringent about cleaning it, preferably each time it's played. Take it apart piece by piece. Clean the parts with a brush and rubbing alcohol or detergent and warm water. Allow the pieces to drip dry.