

Asthma

Asthma is a common disease of the airways, the tubes that carry air to your lungs. With asthma, the muscles in the airways tighten and the lining becomes swollen and inflamed, producing sticky mucus. These changes cause the airways to become narrow, making it difficult to breathe.

Most people with asthma only have symptoms when they inhale a 'trigger' such as pollen, exercise without the right preparation, or catch a cold or flu.

Although asthma is not yet curable, with good management, people with asthma can lead normal, active lives.

Asthma tends to run in families

Many people with asthma will have someone else in their family with asthma too. However, asthma affects everyone differently – even two children from the same family can have different asthma patterns and triggers.

Around one in ten Australians have asthma – about one in ten adults and one in nine or ten children. It is often associated with other allergic conditions like hay fever and eczema.

Symptoms of asthma

Typical asthma symptoms include:

- Coughing
- Tight feeling in the chest
- Wheezing – whistling noise when breathing
- Shortness of breath
- Struggling to breathe

These symptoms are often worse at night, in the early morning or during exercise.

Children may also:

- Not eat or drink as much
- Cry
- Have a tummy ache and vomiting
- Become tired quickly
- Get more puffed out than usual when running and playing.

Causes of asthma

Asthma symptoms are triggered by different things for different people. Some common triggers are:

- Allergy triggers like house dust mites, pollens, pets and moulds
- Cigarette smoke
- Viral infections (for example, colds and flu)
- Cold air or changes in the weather
- Work-related triggers (for example, wood dust, chemicals, metal salts)
- Some medicines

Treatment for asthma

Asthma can be well controlled with the appropriate medication in almost all people. The main types of medication are:

- **Relievers** – act quickly to relax the muscles around the airways. This is the medication to use during an asthma attack
- **Preventers** – slowly make the airways less sensitive to triggers and reduce inflammation inside the airways. They are taken daily to keep you well.
- **Symptom controllers** – slowly help to relax the muscles around the airways. They are taken daily together with a preventer.
- **Combination medication** – the combination of both a preventer and a symptom controller in the one inhaler.

Medication and advice

Your doctor will prescribe the correct medication and explain how to use it. For good asthma management, it is important that you:

- See your doctor for regular check-ups and work together to manage your asthma.
- Understand what triggers your asthma (this can be different for everyone).
- Try to avoid or reduce your exposure to these triggers.
- Use your medications as instructed by your doctor, even when you feel well.
- Make sure you are using your inhaler (puffer) correctly.
- Follow your written asthma action plan, developed with your doctor.

Ask your doctor for a personal written asthma action plan. As well as being a reminder of your usual treatment, an action plan helps you recognise worsening asthma and tells you what to do in response. If a child has asthma, give copies of the plan to the school and to anyone else who regularly looks after the child.

What to do during an asthma attack

An asthma attack can come on gradually (for example, if a person gets a cold) or quite quickly (for example, if a person inhales something they are allergic to, such as pollen).

What to look out for:

- increasing wheezing, cough, chest tightness or shortness of breath
- needing to use a reliever again within three hours of taking it
- waking often at night with asthma symptoms.

An asthma attack can become life-threatening if not treated properly, even in someone whose asthma is usually mild or well controlled.

If someone is getting an asthma attack, follow the instructions in their asthma action plan. If they don't have an action plan or you aren't sure what to do, give four puffs of reliever medication and follow the First Aid for Asthma instructions at: www.nationalasthma.org.au/emergency

Call an ambulance in an emergency

Call an ambulance if someone with asthma:

- Finds it very difficult to breathe
- Is unable to speak comfortably or lips are turning blue
- Has symptoms that get worse very quickly
- Is getting little or no relief from their reliever inhaler.

While waiting for the ambulance, give four puffs of reliever medication every four minutes.

Where to get help

- See your doctor if you suspect you or your child has asthma.
- Always call an ambulance (dial 000) immediately if someone has trouble breathing during an attack.
- Asthma Foundation Victoria Tel. 1800 645 130
- First Aid for Asthma:

Things to remember

- The common signs of asthma are coughing and wheezing.
- Different triggers bring on asthma symptoms in different people.
- Asthma can be controlled with reliever and preventer medication.
- An asthma attack can be life-threatening – call an ambulance in an emergency.
- Find out more about asthma and its treatment to help you feel confident to look after yourself or your child.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

National Asthma Council Australia

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