

Asthma and adults

Although asthma is more common in children, adults and older people can still develop asthma. Careful diagnosis is important, because the symptoms can be confused with other illnesses such as some types of heart disease and chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases.

Asthma in adults can be a recurrence of childhood asthma. In some cases, the asthma simply persists into adulthood and in others, the childhood asthma clears up only to reappear later in life. If you weren't diagnosed with asthma in your childhood, perhaps your symptoms were misdiagnosed as bronchitis or some other illness.

Symptoms of asthma in adults

The usual asthma symptoms are present, including:

- Breathlessness
- Wheezing
- Cough, especially at night
- A feeling of tightness in the chest
- Production of mucus.

Triggers

People with adult onset asthma are sensitive to the same kinds of triggers that bring on symptoms in younger people with asthma. Managing adult onset asthma means limiting the amount of exposure to your particular triggers, which could include:

- Allergens such as pollen or mould
- Cigarette smoke
- Dust mite allergen
- Fumes and strong odours
- Infections
- Medications such as beta-blockers and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs
- Exercise and physical activity.

Cigarette smoke

Cigarette smoke is a powerful trigger of asthma symptoms. Other lung illnesses are caused by smoking, including emphysema and chronic bronchitis. It is often hard to tell whether someone has adult onset asthma or some other kind of smoking-related illness because the symptoms can be similar. Managing your symptoms means quitting cigarettes.

Regular medication is important

As people age, their lungs become less efficient. Developing asthma as an adult can speed up the deterioration of lung functioning. Once lung functioning has deteriorated, it never recovers, so it is important that adult onset asthma be properly managed. This might mean taking preventive medication on a daily basis to protect their lung function at all times.

The use of a spacer

It is recommended that all people with asthma, regardless of age, use a spacer when administering medication via a puffer. Spacers help to improve the delivery of medication to the lungs and minimise side effects from medications.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Pharmacist
- Asthma Victoria

Things to remember

- Adult onset asthma could be a recurrence of your childhood asthma.
- The symptoms can be confused with other illnesses of middle age, such as heart disease.
- People with adult onset asthma often need to take preventive medication to protect their lung function.

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

Asthma Foundation of Victoria

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