

Asthma management can be improved

Managing your asthma well can help you lead a normal, active life. Safe and effective preventer and reliever medications for asthma are available for adults and children. Medication to manage asthma symptoms can improve your health, but work most effectively if taken as prescribed.

Asthma is an inflammatory disease of the airways in the lungs. These airways are very sensitive and swell up in response to certain triggers. The muscles in the airways tighten and the airways lining becomes swollen and inflamed, producing sticky mucus. These changes cause the airways to become narrow, making it difficult to breathe and causing typical asthma symptoms such as coughing, wheezing, chest tightness and shortness of breath.

Asthma can be triggered by different things

Asthma is a big health problem in Australia. Over 2 million people have asthma about one in ten adults about one in eight or nine children. While the cause is not known, allergy often plays a large part.

Asthma can be triggered by a variety of factors, including elements in our everyday environment. Common triggers are:

- Viral infections such as colds and flu
- Cigarette smoke
- Exercise and physical activity – asthma triggered by exercise may be helped by medication and/or warm-up exercises. Exercise and activity are important for people with asthma to boost general health and fitness
- Allergens, including house dust mite droppings, pollens, moulds and pet dander (skin particles, sweat and saliva)
- Dust, pollution, wood and bushfire smoke
- Changes in air temperature or weather
- Workplace triggers such as wood dust, chemicals or metal salts
- Chemicals and strong smells, including perfumes and household cleaners
- Some medicines, including aspirin and some blood pressure drugs
- Emotional factors, including laughter or stress
- Some foods and food preservatives, flavourings and colourings (in rare cases).

Different types of medications

With well-managed asthma, it is possible to lead a normal, active life.

Medications for asthma include:

- Relievers
- Preventers
- Symptom controllers
- Combination medications.

Asthma medications are usually taken by inhaler (puffer).

Reliever medications

Reliever medications open up the airways quickly and are taken as needed for immediate relief from asthma symptoms.

Reliever medications are sometimes overused. Using too much of a reliever medication, or using it too often, could create side effects, including tremors (shaking or trembling) and a rapid heart rate. These side effects are not likely to cause harm. However, frequent use of reliever medications may be a sign that asthma is not being well controlled.

If you need to use a reliever puffer more than two or three times a week for asthma symptoms, excluding use before exercise, you should see a doctor to review your asthma and medication.

Preventer medications

Preventer medications make the airways less sensitive and reduce inflammation and swelling. Preventer medications need to be taken every day, over the long term, to be most effective.

Most preventer medications for asthma are inhaled corticosteroid medications. These are not the same as the steroids that have been misused by athletes and body-builders.

Symptom controller medications

People using preventer medications, who still get asthma symptoms, may also be prescribed a symptom controller. These are long-acting reliever medications that open up the airways for up to 12 hours. They should not be used by themselves, so they are usually prescribed in combination with a corticosteroid preventer.

Combination medications

Preventers and symptom controllers are now available as a combined medication in one inhaler so they can easily be taken to achieve good asthma control.

An asthma action plan can help

A written asthma action plan from your doctor can help you manage your asthma better. The plan tells you:

- When, what and how much medication to take
- How to recognise if your asthma symptoms are getting worse
- What to do if your asthma worsens
- When to seek medical help.

Having an asthma action plan can help you take control of your asthma and feel confident managing it.

Tips to help you stick to your asthma medications

Taking medication regularly can be difficult. It can be easy to forget and many people dislike having to take medication, especially when they feel well and have no symptoms.

Here are some suggestions to help you take asthma medication.

- Ask your doctor, asthma educator or pharmacist about the role of each of your medications. Ask for written instructions on how and when to use each one as part of your asthma action plan.
- Know the side effects of your medication so that you know what is and isn't normal. If you have any concerns, talk to your doctor, asthma educator or pharmacist.
- Ask your doctor if your medication can be simplified. One way is to have the same kind of puffer for all your medications, so you don't have to get used to several kinds.
- Ask your doctor to give you a puffer you feel comfortable with. There are special aids for people who have trouble coordinating the 'press and breathe' kind.
- Make sure you use your puffers correctly. Ask your doctor, asthma educator or pharmacist to check your technique.
- Create memory aids for yourself, like taking your medications before you brush your teeth in the morning and evening.

Some extra tips for parents

All the above tips also apply to children, but the following may be useful in helping your child manage their asthma.

- Generally, your child's preventer medication can be taken before and after school, so there is less need for teacher supervision, and hassles from other children are avoided.
- As your child gets older, involve them in decisions about their asthma medications and management.
- Linking asthma medication to your child's own goals can help. For instance, a child who loves sports will take asthma medication if they know it helps them to play better.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your pharmacist
- Your asthma educator
- Your local community health centre
- Asthma Australia Helpline Tel. 1800 645 130

Things to remember

- Asthma medication can improve your health.
- Preventing 'attacks' gives you more freedom to do the things you want.
- Your doctor can help you with a written asthma action plan.

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

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