

## Asthma medications and other drugs

Asthma medication includes relievers, preventers and symptom controllers. You can choose from different inhaler devices depending on your doctor's advice and your preference. Some people with asthma find their symptoms increase if they take other types of pharmaceutical drugs, like aspirin.

### Different types of asthma medication

Types of asthma medication include:

- **Relievers** – usually in blue/grey delivery devices. They provide immediate relief from asthma symptoms by relaxing the muscles around the airways for up to four hours. If you need to use reliever medication more than three times a week (except for controlling exercise-induced asthma), you should speak to your doctor, as this may indicate your asthma is not well controlled. This is the only medication to use in an asthma attack.
- **Preventers** – usually in brown, white, yellow or orange delivery devices. Preventers make the airways less sensitive to triggers and reduce inflammation inside the airways. They are taken daily to keep you well. Do not stop taking the preventer, even when you are feeling better. If you are taking a preventer medication, it should be reviewed every three months by your doctor.
- **Symptom controllers** – usually in green delivery devices. They are long-acting relievers that help to relax the muscles around the airways for up to 12 hours. They are taken daily and should be used together with a preventer. Symptom controllers should not be taken to manage an asthma attack.
- **Combination medication** – the combination of both the preventer and symptom controller in one delivery device. As already stated, they are to be taken daily and are not to be used to manage an asthma attack, unless otherwise prescribed by your doctor.

### How these medications are taken

There are several different devices that can deliver asthma medications. Typically asthma medications are inhaled (breathed in) so they can go straight to the lungs where they are needed and get to work quickly.

### Different types of inhaler devices

Inhalers are the most common devices. It is important that you work together with your doctor to decide which inhaler device is best for you.

**Aerosol inhalers** use an aerosol canister to produce a fine mist of medication. The two types of aerosol inhaler are:

- **Metered dose inhalers** (puffers) – always shake the canister before use. Puffers are easier to use with a spacer and are more effective this way. It is recommended that anyone with asthma uses a spacer with their puffer.
- **Autohalers** (breath activated) – these involve an aerosol canister that is spring-loaded. The medication automatically mists out when you start to breathe in through the mouthpiece. These are good for children and for those people who find it hard to coordinate the puffers.

**Dry powder inhalers** contain medication as a dry powder rather than a liquid like the aerosol inhalers. To effectively use a dry powder inhaler, you are required to breathe in deeply to get the medication into your lungs. Young children and people who are short of breath might find dry powder inhalers hard to use. There are three kinds:

- Turbuhaler
- Accuhaler
- Aerolizer.

A **spacer** is a special device that looks like a clear plastic football or tube that is attached to a metered dose inhaler. You fire one puff of medication at a time into the spacer and then breathe in and out normally for four breaths. Using a spacer with a puffer increases the amount of medication that will reach your lungs and reduces possible side effects from medication. Spacers come in a variety of shapes and sizes, depending on your needs and age.

**Nebulisers** turn the medication into a fine mist that you breathe through a mask or mouthpiece. A nebuliser is sometimes useful for the very young and for older people. Most people do not need a nebuliser at home. Studies have shown that a puffer and spacer are equally as effective as a nebuliser.

## Some medications can trigger asthma symptoms

It is very important that you inform your doctor and pharmacist that you have asthma when a new medicine is prescribed to you or when buying over-the-counter medications. There are some medications that can aggravate asthma symptoms and trigger an asthma episode or attack. If you feel that a particular medicine is making your asthma worse, treat the symptoms as necessary and contact your doctor immediately.

Some of the medications that are known to trigger asthma symptoms in some people include:

- **Aspirin** – contained in many medications, such as pain relievers
- **Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs**– such as ibuprofen (Nurofen) and naproxen (Naprogesic)
- **Beta blocker tablets** – often used to control high blood pressure
- **Beta blocker eye drops** – to treat the eye condition glaucoma
- **Ace inhibitors** – often used to control high blood pressure.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Pharmacist
- The Asthma Foundation of Victoria Tel. 1800 645 130 or (03) 9326 7088

## Things to remember

- The three main types of asthma medication are relievers, preventers and symptom controllers.
- If you need to take your reliever more than three times per week, you should see your doctor.
- There are different inhaler devices depending on your needs and what your doctor recommends.

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

Asthma Foundation of Victoria

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