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## Asthma emergency first aid

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### Summary

- An asthma attack can become an emergency, needing first aid and urgent medical attention.
- If you take quick action, you can reduce the risk of an asthma emergency.
- If you or a family member has asthma, be sure to prepare an Asthma Action Plan with the help of your doctor.
- In an asthma emergency, call triple zero (000) and ask for an ambulance.
- During an asthma attack or emergency, follow your Asthma Action Plan or the asthma first aid steps.

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An asthma flare-up is a worsening of asthma symptoms and lung function compared to what you would usually experience day to day. An asthma flare-up can come on slowly (over hours, days or even weeks) or very quickly (over minutes).

A sudden or severe asthma flare-up is sometimes called an asthma attack. An asthma attack can quickly become an asthma emergency, but if you take quick action, you can reduce the risk of an asthma emergency.

If you or a family member have asthma, make sure you have an updated Asthma Action Plan from your doctor and know the four steps of **asthma first aid**.

Your doctor will:

- prescribe the correct **medication**
- help you to develop a plan to **manage your asthma**
- provide you with an action plan to manage your asthma and provide instructions in case of an asthma flare-up.

Follow your Asthma Action Plan if the symptoms of an asthma attack appear.

### Signs that you need to use asthma first aid

If you are experiencing any of the following signs, start asthma first aid. Do not wait until asthma is severe.

Mild to moderate asthma signs (**commence asthma first aid**):

- minor difficulty breathing
- able to talk in full sentences
- able to walk or move around
- may have a cough or wheeze.

Severe asthma signs (**call triple zero (000) for an ambulance and commence asthma first aid**):

- obvious difficulty breathing
- cannot speak a full sentence in one breath
- tugging of the skin between ribs or at base of neck
- may have cough or wheeze
- reliever medication not lasting as long as usual.

Life-threatening asthma signs (**call triple zero (000) for an ambulance and commence asthma first aid**):

- finds it very difficult to breathe (gasping for air)
- unable to speak one to two words per breath

- confused or exhausted
- lips are turning blue
- has symptoms that get worse very quickly
- collapsing
- is getting little or no relief from their reliever inhaler
- may no longer have wheeze or cough.

**In asthma emergencies, follow your Asthma Action Plan.**

### **Know the four steps of asthma first aid**

It's important for everyone in the community to know the four steps of asthma first aid.

To use **asthma first aid**:

1. Sit the person upright.
2. Give four puffs of blue reliever puffer. Make sure you shake the puffer, put one puff into a spacer at a time and get the person to take four breaths of each puff through the spacer.  
**Remember:** shake, one puff, four breaths.  
If you don't have a spacer, simply give the person four puffs of their reliever directly in to their mouth. Repeat this until the person has taken four puffs.
3. Wait four minutes. If there is no improvement, give four more separate puffs as in step 2.  
**Remember:** shake, one puff, four breaths.
4. If there is still no improvement, call triple zero (000) for an ambulance. Tell the operator that someone is having an asthma emergency. Keep giving the person four separate puffs of reliever medication, taking four breaths for each puff, every four minutes until the ambulance arrives.

If you are not sure if someone is having an asthma attack, you can still use blue reliever medication because it is unlikely to cause harm.

**Call triple zero (000) immediately if:**

- the person is not breathing
- their asthma suddenly becomes worse
- the person is having an asthma attack and there's no blue reliever medication available.

### **Asthma symptoms in a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis)**

People having a severe allergic reaction (**anaphylaxis**) can also have asthma-like symptoms. If the person has an **anaphylaxis action plan**, follow the instructions. If they have known severe allergies and carry an adrenaline autoinjector (also known as an epi-pen), use that before using asthma reliever medication.

**In case of an emergency, call triple zero (000) and ask for an ambulance.**

### **Where to get help**

- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)
- Emergency department of your nearest hospital
- Your **GP (doctor)**
- The **Royal Children's Hospital** has produced a number of videos to help you better understand and manage your child's asthma
- **NURSE-ON-CALL** Tel. **1300 60 60 24** – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- **National Home Doctor Service** Tel. 13 SICK (**13 7425**) for after-hours home doctor visits (bulk billed)
- **Asthma Australia** Tel. 1800 ASTHMA (**1800 278 462**)
- **National Asthma Council of Australia** Tel. **1800 032 495**
- **Allergy and Anaphylaxis Australia** Tel. **1300 728 000**

**[View an accessible version of the video and read the transcript](#)**

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

Asthma Australia

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