
Asthma explained

Summary

- The common symptoms of asthma are wheezing, breathlessness and chest tightness
 - Different triggers bring on asthma symptoms in different people.
 - Asthma can be controlled with regular preventer medication every day (if prescribed) and using a reliever when symptoms flare up.
 - People experiencing asthma-like symptoms for the first time should visit their GP for assessment and advice, and if appropriate, develop an asthma management plan.
 - An asthma attack can threaten life – call triple zero (000) for an ambulance in an emergency and tell the operator that someone is having an asthma attack.
 - Find out more about asthma and its treatment – this will help improve asthma control and help you feel more confident to look after yourself, your child or anyone in your care.
 - A range of programs and services are available to support Australians with asthma.
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Asthma is a common disease of the airways – the structures through which air passes when moving from your mouth and nose right down to the smallest structures in your lungs. About one in nine to ten Australians have asthma. It is often associated with other allergic conditions like hay fever and eczema.

Asthma causes the muscles in the airways to tighten and the lining of the airway becomes swollen and inflamed, producing sticky mucous. These changes cause the airways to become narrow, making it difficult to breathe. Asthma can be triggered by a range of factors such as pollen, house dust mites, cigarette smoke, exercise or associated with a cold.

Asthma cannot be cured, but with good management, people with asthma can lead normal, active lives. A range of programs and services are available to support people with asthma.

Symptoms of asthma

Asthma tends to run in families. Asthma affects everyone differently, and two children from the same family can have different asthma patterns and triggers.

Typical asthma symptoms include:

- wheezing – a whistling noise when breathing
- shortness of breath
- a tight feeling in the chest
- coughing

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

Symptoms may be different for children. Find out more about [asthma in children](#).

Causes of asthma

The triggers for asthma symptoms vary for different people. Some common triggers are:

- allergy triggers such as house dust mites, pollens, pets and moulds
 - cigarette smoke
 - viral infections – for example, colds and flu
 - cold air or changes in the weather
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- work-related triggers – for example, wood dust, chemicals, metal salts
- some medication.

In addition, asthma can also be triggered by an uncommon combination of high grass pollen levels and a certain type of thunderstorm, causing a large number of people to develop asthma symptoms over a short period of time. This is known as epidemic thunderstorm asthma. These events are uncommon and don't occur every year, but when they do, they can happen in south-east Australia during the grass pollen season, from October through December.

Thunderstorm asthma

For people with current or past asthma or seasonal hayfever, thunderstorm asthma can be sudden, serious and even life threatening. Having good control of your asthma can help reduce your risk of thunderstorm asthma.

If you've ever had asthma, talk to your GP about what you can do to help protect yourself from the risk of thunderstorm asthma this pollen season.

Find out more about [thunderstorm asthma](#).

Watch our video about [asthma and thunderstorm asthma](#).

Treatment for asthma

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

- **relievers** that act quickly to relax the muscles around the airways – this is the medication used during an asthma attack
- **preventers** that slowly make the airways less sensitive to triggers and reduce inflammation inside the airways – they are taken daily to help keep you well
- **combination** therapies that are preventers containing two different medicines.

Management of asthma

[Good asthma management](#) from the [National Asthma Council](#).

Your GP will prescribe the correct medication and explain how to use it. For good [asthma management](#), it is important that you:

- See your GP 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 GP, even when you feel well.
- Make sure you are using your inhaler (puffer) correctly, including using a spacer where required.
- Follow your written [asthma action plan](#).

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

The symptoms to look out for include:

- increasing wheezing, shortness of breath, chest tightness and coughing,
- needing to use a reliever again within three hours of last 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, follow the four steps of **asthma first aid**.

Always call an ambulance in an asthma emergency

In an emergency, always call triple zero (000) and ask for an ambulance. Tell the operator that someone is having an asthma attack. The signs of an asthma emergency include when the person:

- finds it very difficult to breathe
- is unable to speak comfortably or if their 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, continue to follow the four steps of **asthma first aid** and give four puffs of reliever medication every four minutes.

Asthma in Australia

Some other facts about asthma in Australia include:

- Asthma is one of the most common reasons for admission to hospital for children.
- Asthma is more common among boys than girls in primary school age children. After the teenage years, more women have asthma than men.
- Asthma is more common among Indigenous Australians, particularly adults, than among other Australians.
- People with asthma commonly have other allergic conditions like eczema or hay fever.
- People with asthma report poorer general health and quality of life than people without asthma.
- Thunderstorm asthma events are uncommon and don't occur every year. In south-east Australia they can happen during grass pollen season from October through December.

National asthma management strategies

Asthma is a national health priority in Australia. Strategies to monitor and manage asthma in Australia include:

- **Asthma Cycle of Care** – support for GPs to provide best-practice asthma care for people, including the use of written asthma action plans
- **First Aid for Asthma** – information about how to obtain prompt medical assistance in an emergency
- **Asthma Australia** – provides a range of asthma-related programs and activities, and conducts first aid for asthma training. It also delivers the Asthma Child and Adolescent Program and the Community Support Program
- **Australian Centre for Airways disease Monitoring (ACAM)** – monitors and reports on airways disease (asthma and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease) in Australia
- **National Asthma Council Australia** – works with health professionals to improve health outcomes for people with asthma and provides a range of information for the community.

Where to get help

- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)
- Emergency department of your nearest hospital
- Your GP
- Your nearest pharmacy (for medication)
- **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 GP visits (bulk billed)
- **Asthma Australia Helpline** Tel. 1800 ASTHMA (**1800 278 462**)

- **Asthma Australia Asthma App**– provides easy access to the latest asthma information, asthma medication and devices, device technique videos, asthma action plans, asthma first aid steps
- **National Asthma Council of Australia** Tel. **1800 032 495**
- The **Severe Asthma Toolkit** - An evidence-based website developed by clinicians for clinicians, led by the **Centre of Excellence in Severe Asthma**. It provides educational content on topics relevant to severe asthma and practical resources and tools to guide optimal asthma management by health care professionals.

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

National Asthma Council Australia

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