

## Asthma

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. Asthma is the most widespread chronic health problem in Australia. About one in ten Australian adults and one in nine or ten children 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 mucus. These changes cause the airways to become narrow, making it difficult to breathe. Most people with asthma only have symptoms when they inhale a 'trigger' such as pollen, exercise without the right preparation, or catch a cold or flu.

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, however, and even two children from the same family can have different asthma patterns and triggers.

Typical asthma symptoms include:

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

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

Children may also:

- not eat or drink as much
- cry
- have a tummy ache and vomiting
- become tired quickly
- get more puffed out than usual when running and playing.

### 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
- work-related triggers – for example, wood dust, chemicals, metal salts
- some medication.

### Treatment for asthma

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

Your doctor will prescribe the correct medication and explain how to use it. For good asthma management, it is important that you:

- See your doctor 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 doctor, even when you feel well.
- Make sure you are using your inhaler (puffer) correctly.
- Follow your written Asthma Action Plan.

Ask your doctor 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 that you should look out for include:

- increasing wheezing, coughing, chest tightness or shortness of breath
- 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, give four puffs of reliever medication and follow the First Aid for Asthma instructions on the chart available from National Asthma Council Australia.

## 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 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, 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 among 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.
- Asthma is less common among Australians who were born in non-English-speaking countries than among other Australians.
- More than eight in 10 people with asthma are affected by allergy.
- People with asthma report poorer general health and quality of life than people without asthma.

## 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 doctors 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 – an association of the eight state-based asthma foundations that 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 Asthma Monitoring – monitors and reports on asthma rates and impacts 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

- Your doctor
- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)
- Asthma Foundation of Victoria Tel. 1800 ASTHMA (1800 278 462)

## Things to remember

- The common signs of asthma are chest tightness and wheezing.
- 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.
- 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 you feel more confident to look after yourself or your child.
- A range of programs and services are available to support Australians with asthma.

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

National Asthma Council Australia

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