

Asthma

Emergency Department factsheets



What is asthma?

Asthma is a common medical condition that affects the small airways of the lungs. During an asthma attack, the lining of the airways swell, there is a build up of mucous/phlegm and the muscles around the airways tighten. This causes a narrowing of the airways (*bronchoconstriction*) which may make it difficult to breathe.

Why do people get asthma in the first place?

The causes of asthma are not fully understood, but there is often a family history of asthma, eczema or hay fever. Asthma can begin at any age and can change over time. Children of mothers who smoked during pregnancy and children exposed to second-hand smoke in early childhood have a higher risk of developing asthma.

What triggers asthma?

People with asthma have sensitive airways. Although the exact cause of asthma is unknown, many people have known factors that may 'trigger' an attack these include:

- colds and flu (especially in children)
- exercise (this can be managed)
- pollens, moulds and grasses
- animal hair and dander (skin flakes)
- dust mites
- cigarette smoke
- changes in air temperature and weather
- certain drugs (e.g. aspirin and some blood pressure medications)
- some chemicals, strong smells and aerosol sprays (e.g. perfume)
- some emotions (e.g. stress).

What are the symptoms of asthma?

An asthma attack can develop suddenly over minutes or slowly over days. Typical symptoms include:

- coughing
- wheezing (a whistle in the chest when breathing)
- difficulty breathing
- tightness in the chest.

Treatment

With the right Asthma Action Plan, medication and regular check-ups, asthma can be managed so that you lead a normal, active life. Medications are mostly taken through a metered dose inhaler (MDI) or a 'puffer'. Spacers or space chambers are used to give puffer medication to children. They come in different shapes and sizes, depending on a person's age, size and needs.

There are different medications to treat asthma.

- **Relievers:** Short acting bronchodilators relax the airway muscles and therefore rapidly open the narrowed airways. These include *Ventolin*, *Bricanyl* and *Atrovent*. These are only used when needed, such as before or during sport or during an attack.
- **Preventers:** Prevent attacks by treating inflamed airways. These need to be taken every day. They include *Pulmicort*, *Flixotide*, *Tilade* or *Intal*.
- **Symptom controllers:** These help to keep the narrowed airways open for longer (up to 12 hours). These do not help during an attack. They include *Serevent*, *Oxis*, and *Foradil*

Emergency treatment

While in the emergency department, you may have been given reliever medicine to help open your airways. You may feel 'shaky' and your chest may feel like it is pounding – these are the normal side effects of larger doses of *Ventolin*.

The reliever medication may have been given through a spacer or nebuliser. A spacer or space chamber is a clear tube that you press the puffer into. A spacer makes sure the drug goes deep into your lungs where it is needed. They are easy to use at home and are portable.

You may also have been given a steroid medication called prednisolone, which reduces the swelling in the airways. This is given as a tablet or syrup and takes four to six hours to work. This medication is normally given for a few days during an acute attack, depending on your needs. Other steroids (such as *hydrocortisone* or *dexamethasone*) may have been given intravenously (into a vein) if your condition was serious, as they work much faster.

Home care

In most cases you can treat your asthma at home.

- Take your asthma puffers as directed. Know how to use your puffer or spacer correctly.
- Carry your puffers with you at all times.
- Monitor your asthma. Learn to use a peak flow meter to check your breathing.
- Stay active and healthy. Eat nutritional foods and get regular exercise, avoid smoking
- Physical activity keeps you fit and healthy. Ask your doctor for advice about exercise.
- Identify trigger factors and try avoid them.
- Have regular check-ups with your local doctor
- Follow an Asthma Action Plan.

Ask your local doctor for an Asthma Action Plan that is right for you.

Do not:

- stop your medication unless your doctor advises you to
- smoke or expose children to smoke.

Action steps

- Develop asthma action plan with your health care professional
- Ensure you are using your inhalers correctly
- Have your relief haler with you at all times
- Know your asthma triggers and avoid them
- Review your action plan at least yearly

Seeking help

In a medical emergency, go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

For other medical problems see your local doctor or health-care professional.

13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) provides health information, referral and teletriage services to the public in all parts of Queensland and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for the cost of a local call*.

*Calls from mobile phones may be charged at a higher rate. Please check with your telephone service provider

Disclaimer: This health information is for general education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for you.

Want to know more?

Visit the Ambulances for asthma website

www.ambulancesforasthma.net.au

Contact the Asthma Foundation Queensland

Phone 1800 ASTHMA

1800 278 462

www.asthmaaustralia.org.au

Contact Quit for help to stop smoking

Phone 13QUIT (13 78 48)

www.quit.org.au

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