

# Asthma

**Asthma is an inflammation of the airways that makes breathing difficult. It affects more than two million Australians. Asthma cannot be cured, but can be well controlled with medicines, allowing a person with asthma to live a normal and active life, free of symptoms.**

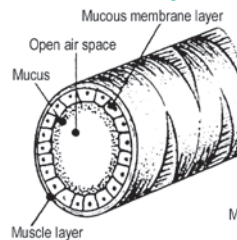
People with asthma have sensitive airways in their lungs. Certain triggers cause the muscles around their airways to tighten, the lining of their airways to become inflamed and swollen and extra mucus to be secreted, making air passages narrower and breathing difficult.

## Symptoms

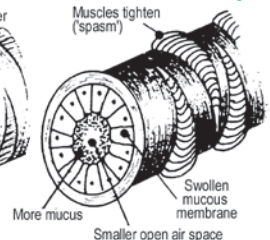
Symptoms of asthma include:

- A dry cough, especially at night, early in the morning and with exercise or activity
- Wheezing or whistling sound with breathing
- Breathlessness
- Chest tightness.

## Normal Airways



## Asthma Airways



A person with asthma may have one or more of these symptoms. Children may describe symptoms as a sore tummy, sore chest or a frog in their throat.

## What can trigger symptoms?

There are many triggers for asthma including:

- Inhaled allergens (e.g., house dust mites, pollens, moulds, animal hair)

- Cigarette smoke
- Colds and flu
- Cold air or a drop in air temperature
- Exercise or physical activity (exercise-induced asthma)
- Certain medicines (e.g., aspirin, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, beta blockers (including some eye drops for glaucoma), echinacea, royal jelly)
- Air pollution (e.g., dust, smoke)
- Strong smells and fumes (e.g., chemicals, paints, perfumes, cleaning agents)
- Emotional upset, stress, anxiety
- Some foods and food preservatives, flavourings and colourings
- Gastrointestinal reflux (heartburn).

Some people have 'occupational asthma' that is triggered by something associated with their work or workplace.

## Management

Asthma management aims to keep a person completely free of asthma symptoms and prevent lung damage from asthma. It involves managing asthma triggers and correct use of asthma medicines. Special breathing exercises may also help. For best possible control of symptoms, people with asthma are advised to visit their doctor or health clinic regularly to:

- Assess asthma symptoms and severity
- Review asthma management and medicines
- Develop and review a written Asthma Action Plan to manage worsening asthma.

## Medicines

Most asthma medicines are inhaled into the lungs. The three main types of asthma medicines are called relievers, preventers and symptom controllers. Refer to the *Asthma Medicines* Fact Card for more information.

## Self care

- Identify and avoid or manage your asthma triggers.
- Always carry a reliever (blue) inhaler with you. If you need to use a reliever more than three times each week (excluding before exercise), your asthma may not be as well controlled as it could be. Check with a doctor.
- Monitor asthma symptoms and control regularly using a peak flow meter or an 'asthma assessment tool' (e.g., asthma score). Ask a doctor, pharmacist or asthma educator for advice.
- Know how to recognise worsening asthma and how to use your Asthma Action Plan.
- Teach your family, friends and co-workers First Aid for Asthma.
- Don't smoke and avoid other people's smoke.
- Exercise regularly. Always warm up and, if necessary, use your reliever or symptom controller before exercise.
- Check with your doctor or pharmacist before stopping or starting any medicines, including non-prescription and complementary medicines.

## First Aid for Asthma

- 1 Sit the person comfortably upright. Be calm and reassuring. Do not leave them alone.
- 2 Give 4 puffs of a blue **Reliever** inhaler (puffer) – Ventolin, Airomir, Bricanyl or Asmol. Relievers are best given through a **spacer**, if available. Use 1 puff at a time and ask the person to take 4 breaths from the spacer after each puff. Use the person's own inhaler if possible. If not, use the First Aid kit inhaler or borrow one from someone else.
- 3 Wait 4 minutes. If there is no improvement, give another 4 puffs.
- 4 If little or no improvement, **CALL AN AMBULANCE IMMEDIATELY (DIAL 000)** and state that the person is having an asthma attack. Keep giving 4 puffs every 4 minutes until the ambulance arrives. **Children:** 4 puffs each time is a safe dose. **Adults:** up to 6–8 puffs every 5 minutes may be given for a severe attack while waiting for the ambulance.

### With Spacer



- ▲ Shake inhaler and insert mouthpiece into spacer.
- ▲ Place spacer mouthpiece in person's mouth and fire 1 puff.
- ▲ Ask the person to breathe in and out normally for about 4 breaths.
- ▲ Repeat in quick succession until 4 puffs have been given.

### Without Spacer



- ▲ Shake inhaler.
- ▲ Place mouthpiece in the person's mouth. Fire 1 puff as the person inhales slowly and steadily.
- ▲ Ask the person to hold that breath for 4 seconds, then take 4 normal breaths.
- ▲ Repeat until 4 puffs have been given.

### What if it is the first attack of Asthma?

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| ▲ If someone collapses and appears to have difficulty breathing, <b>CALL AN AMBULANCE IMMEDIATELY</b> , whether or not the person is known to have asthma. | ▲ No harm is likely to result from giving a Reliever to someone who does not have asthma. |
| ▲ Give 4 puffs of a Reliever and repeat if no improvement.   |   |
| ▲ Keep giving 4 puffs every 4 minutes until the ambulance arrives.   |   |

This chart is a general guide only. It is not intended to be a substitute for individual medical advice/treatment. The National Asthma Council and the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia expressly disclaim all responsibility (including for negligence) for any loss, damage or personal injury resulting from reliance on this information.

## For more information

### **Asthma Foundations Australia**

Phone: 1800 645 130

Website: [www.asthmaaustralia.org.au](http://www.asthmaaustralia.org.au)

### **Cooperative Research Centre for Asthma and Airways**

Website: [www.asthma.crc.org.au](http://www.asthma.crc.org.au)

(for information on breathing exercises)

### **National Asthma Council**

Phone: 1800 032 495

Website: [www.nationalasthma.org.au](http://www.nationalasthma.org.au)

### **Asthma Score**

Website: [www.asthmascore.com.au](http://www.asthmascore.com.au)

### **MedicAlert**

Phone: 1800 88 22 22

[www.medicalert.org.au](http://www.medicalert.org.au)

### **Healthdirect Australia**

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

### **Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)**

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

### **National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information**

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

### **The Poisons Information Centre**

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

*Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.*

### **Related fact cards**

» *Asthma Medicines*

» *Colds and Flu*

» *Smoking*

Your Self Care Pharmacy: