

Asthma

# **BASIC FACTS**

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Staying safe and  
well with asthma



**ASTHMA  
AUSTRALIA**

# WHAT ARE AIRWAYS?

Airways are found in your lungs. Airways make up a network of tubes used to carry air in and out of the body when you are breathing.

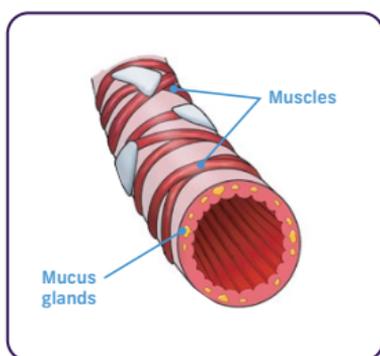
# WHAT IS ASTHMA?

Asthma is a long-term lung condition which can be controlled but cannot currently be cured. People with asthma have sensitive airways. These airways are more likely to react to triggers. The lining of the airways is thicker and inflamed. When a person with asthma has an asthma flare-up, the muscles around the airway squeeze tight, the airways swell and become narrow, and there is more mucus. This makes it hard to breathe.

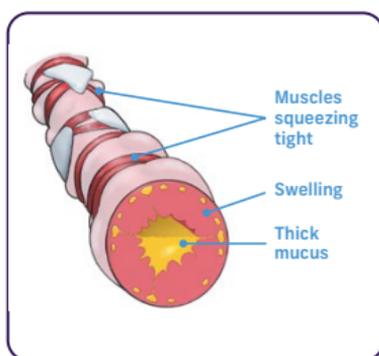
An asthma flare-up can come on slowly (over hours, days or even weeks) or very quickly (over minutes). A sudden or severe asthma flare-up is sometimes called an asthma attack. Any person with asthma can have an asthma flare-up.

The good news is, for most people, asthma can be well-controlled by following a daily management plan. People with well-controlled asthma have irregular asthma symptoms and very few flare-ups. This means that people with asthma can live healthy, active lives.

## NORMAL OR WELL MANAGED ASTHMA AIRWAY



## AIRWAYS DURING ASTHMA FLARE-UP



## **ASTHMA FACTS**

- 1 in 9 people in Australia have asthma. That is around 2.7 million people (11% of the population)
- 389 people died from asthma in 2018
- 38,792 Australians were hospitalised in 2017-18
- Approximately 80% of asthma hospitalisations are preventable

To view the latest asthma statistics online, visit [asthma.org.au/about-asthma/understanding-asthma/statistics/](https://asthma.org.au/about-asthma/understanding-asthma/statistics/)

## **HOW DO YOU RECOGNISE ASTHMA?**

People with asthma can have a range of symptoms:

- Breathlessness
- Wheezing
- Tight chest
- Persistent cough
- Symptoms often occur at night, early in the morning or during/after activity

A person's asthma symptoms can vary over time - sometimes they will have no symptoms, especially when asthma is well-controlled. Symptoms often vary from person to person.

## **WHO GETS ASTHMA & WHY?**

Asthma affects people of all ages. Some people get asthma when they are young; others when they are older. The causes are not entirely understood, although people with asthma often have a family history of asthma, eczema and hay fever. There is some evidence that exposure to environmental factors such as workplace chemicals or tobacco smoke can lead to asthma.

Researchers continue to try to find out more about what causes asthma and how we might prevent it.

# HOW DO PEOPLE WITH ASTHMA KEEP SAFE AND WELL?

While we still need to find out more about what causes asthma, we do know a lot about how to live well with asthma. Most people can carry out their lives normally, by following simple asthma treatments. Arrange to see your doctor for a review of your asthma at least twice a year.

## UNDERSTANDING YOUR LEVEL OF ASTHMA SYMPTOM CONTROL

Think about your asthma over the last 4 weeks and look at the chart below to see if your asthma control is good, partial, or poor.

<b>Good control</b>	<b>Partial control</b>	<b>Poor control</b>
<b>All of:</b>	<b>One or two of:</b>	<b>Three or more of:</b>
Able to do all your usual activities	Less able to do your usual activities	Less able to do your usual activities
No asthma symptoms during night or on waking	Any asthma symptoms during night or on waking	Any asthma symptoms during night or on waking
Daytime symptoms no more than two days per week	Daytime symptoms more than two days per week	Daytime symptoms more than two days per week
Need reliever no more than two days per week*	Need reliever more than two days per week*	Need reliever more than two days per week*

## **SEE YOUR DOCTOR IF YOU:**

- Wake up coughing, wheezing or breathless
- Struggle to keep up with normal activity
- Use your reliever more than two days per week

It is also important to see your doctor if you have had asthma symptoms, a flare-up or hospital presentation in the last month. This may indicate that you need regular preventer treatment or a review of your current preventer medication.

If started on or changing medications, book a follow-up appointment with your doctor in one month's time to review your asthma control.

## **GET A WRITTEN ASTHMA ACTION PLAN FROM YOUR DOCTOR**

A written Asthma Action Plan tells you how to:

- Recognise when your asthma is getting worse
- Adjust your reliever and preventer medication based on your level of asthma control
- Know when to seek medical help

## **ASTHMA AUSTRALIA CAN HELP YOU:**

- Learn about asthma and Asthma First Aid
- Learn about your asthma symptoms, triggers and medication
- Learn about written Asthma Action Plans
- Learn how to use your asthma devices correctly
- Understand how other health conditions might impact your asthma
- To understand and engage with various health services

**CALL 1800 ASTHMA (1800 278 462) or visit [asthma.org.au](http://asthma.org.au)**

# DO YOU KNOW YOUR TRIGGERS?

A trigger is something that can set off your asthma symptoms. Every person with asthma has different triggers.

Common asthma triggers include:

- Colds and flu
- Smoke, for example from cigarettes or fire
- Inhaled allergens; for example dust, pollens, moulds, pet dander, dust mites
- Workplace chemicals and environment
- Poor air quality
- Changes in temperature and weather
- Emotions, for example laughter or stress
- Some medications
- Some food chemicals and additives (e.g. sulfites can trigger asthma in some people)
- Exercise can be an asthma trigger (especially if your asthma is poorly controlled)

When a person's asthma is well-controlled, triggers are less likely to set off an asthma flare-up. A written Asthma Action Plan can support you to keep your asthma under good control. People with well-controlled asthma can live healthy active lives and participate in exercise.

**Some triggers can be avoidable, and it is helpful to understand what triggers your asthma. To find out more, visit [asthma.org.au/about-asthma/triggers/](https://asthma.org.au/about-asthma/triggers/)**

It is important to know what to do if something makes your asthma worse. Follow your written Asthma Action Plan or see your doctor.

# **LIVE WELL WITH YOUR ASTHMA**

If you have asthma, see your doctor if you:

- Are coughing, wheezing or breathless at any time of the day or night
- Struggle to keep up with normal activity
- Use your blue/grey reliever puffer more than two days per week
- Are unsure about the way your medications and devices can work best for you
- Have recently presented to hospital for an asthma flare-up
- Changed or started preventer medications in the last one to three months

**Remember, asthma should not stop you from living your life freely.**



# HELPING SOMEONE WITH AN ASTHMA FLARE-UP

An asthma flare-up can happen to anyone with asthma, at any time.

Asthma flare-ups can get worse very quickly (in seconds to minutes) – some people call this an asthma attack.

Asthma flare-ups can also develop more slowly (over hours to days or even weeks).

Asthma First Aid can save someone's life.

Do not wait until asthma is severe to start first aid.

Everyone can learn Asthma First Aid.

**Signs of an asthma flare-up can include any of the following:**

## MILD/MODERATE

- Minor difficulty breathing
- Able to talk in full sentences
- Able to walk/move around
- May have cough or wheeze

### Follow these steps:

- Ask the person if they have asthma and if they need help
- If so, assist the person with Asthma First Aid

## SEVERE

- Obvious difficulty breathing
- Cannot speak a full sentence in one breath
- Tugging in of the skin between ribs or at base of neck
- May have cough or wheeze
- Reliever medication not lasting as long as usual

### Follow these steps:

- Call Ambulance on Triple Zero (000)
- Commence Asthma First Aid

## LIFE-THREATENING

- Gasping for breath
- Unable to speak or 1-2 words per breath
- Confused or exhausted
- Turning blue
- Collapsing
- May no longer have wheeze or cough
- Not responding to reliever medication

### Follow these steps:

- Call Ambulance on Triple Zero (000)
- Commence Asthma First Aid

# ASTHMA FIRST AID

1



## SIT THE PERSON UPRIGHT

- Be calm and reassuring
- Do not leave them alone

2



## GIVE 4 SEPARATE PUFFS OF BLUE/GREY RELIEVER PUFFER

- Shake puffer
- Put 1 puff into spacer
- Take 4 breaths from spacer
  - **Repeat** until 4 puffs have been taken

**OR** give 2 separate inhalations of Bricanyl (6 years or older)  
**OR** give 1 inhalation of Symbicort Turbuhaler (12 years or older)  
**OR** give 2 puffs of Symbicort Rapihaler through a spacer

**If no spacer available:** Take 1 puff as you take 1 slow, deep breath and hold breath for as long as comfortable. Repeat until all puffs are given

3



## WAIT 4 MINUTES

- If there is no improvement, give 4 more separate puffs of blue/grey reliever as above

**OR** give 1 more inhalation of Bricanyl

**OR** give 1 more inhalation of Symbicort Turbuhaler

**OR** give 2 puffs of Symbicort Rapihaler through a spacer

## IF THERE IS STILL NO IMPROVEMENT

4



## DIAL TRIPLE ZERO (000)

- Say 'ambulance' and that someone is having an asthma attack
- Keep giving 4 separate puffs every 4 minutes until emergency assistance arrives

**OR** give 1 inhalation of a Bricanyl or Symbicort Turbuhaler every 4 minutes – up to a max of 3 more inhalations of Symbicort Turbuhaler

**OR** give 2 puffs of Symbicort Rapihaler through a spacer every 4 minutes – up to a max of 6 more puffs of Symbicort Rapihaler

## CALL EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE IMMEDIATELY AND DIAL TRIPLE ZERO (000) IF:

- the person is not breathing
- the person's asthma suddenly becomes worse or is not improving
- the person is having an asthma attack and a reliever is not available
- you are not sure if it is asthma
- **the person is known to have anaphylaxis – follow their Anaphylaxis Action Plan, then give Asthma First Aid**

Blue/grey reliever medication is unlikely to harm, even if the person does not have asthma.



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**1800 ASTHMA**  
(1800 278 462)

[asthma.org.au](http://asthma.org.au)

# KNOW HOW YOUR MEDICATIONS WORK FOR YOU

There is a wide range of asthma medications. It is helpful to understand how these medications help your asthma, and the role they play in keeping you well.

The most common are shown here:

Reliever – Blue/Grey colour	
What it does	Relaxes tight airways for up to 4 hours
Time to work	Very quickly – in about 4 minutes
When to take it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— When you have symptoms</li> <li>— Emergency</li> <li>— Before exercise as prescribed</li> </ul>
Helpful to know	Carry it with you always in case of symptoms



Preventer – Autumn/Desert colour	
What it does	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Soothes airways</li> <li>— Reduces swelling</li> <li>— Reduces mucus</li> </ul>
Time to work	Slowly - days to weeks
When to take it	Every day as prescribed — even if you feel well
Helpful to know	The key to keeping well with asthma



## Combination Preventers

<b>What it does</b>	Works like a preventer and relaxes airway muscles
<b>Time to work</b>	Fairly quickly, but more improvement with continued use
<b>When to take it</b>	Every day as prescribed — even if you feel well
<b>Helpful to know</b>	Prescribed for people who have symptoms even with regular preventer use



It is important to know how to use your asthma devices properly to ensure you get the right dose and maximum benefit from your medication. We know that 9 out of 10 people do not use their puffers/inhalers correctly.

For example, using a spacer with a puffer/inhaler is much better than using a puffer alone.

You can ask your doctor to review your asthma device technique at your next visit, or you can watch device technique videos on our website.

**See the Asthma Australia website for more information [asthma.org.au](http://asthma.org.au)**

# **WHAT IS THUNDERSTORM ASTHMA?**

Epidemic Thunderstorm Asthma is the phenomenon where a large number of people develop asthma symptoms over a short period of time. It is thought to be triggered by an uncommon combination of high pollen levels and a certain type of thunderstorm.

This occurs when pollen grains from grasses get swept up in the wind and carried for long distances. Just before the storm, some burst open and release tiny particles that are concentrated in the wind, and blown down to ground, where people can breathe them in. They are small enough to go deep into the lungs and can trigger asthma.

These thunderstorm asthma events don't occur every year but when they do, they can happen during the grass pollen season in south-east Australia. The grass pollen season varies across Australia however in south-east Australia it is typically from October through December.

## **Who is at risk of thunderstorm asthma?**

Those at increased risk of Epidemic Thunderstorm Asthma include:

- People with asthma
- People with a past history of asthma
- Those with undiagnosed asthma
- People with seasonal hay fever who have not ever had asthma

Having both asthma and hay fever and poor control of asthma increases the risk further.

Managing your asthma and hay fever well means:

- Knowing the symptoms of hay fever and asthma
- Having the right plan and medications in place to best handle your symptoms before pollen season starts.

# **THIS MEANS TAKING THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS:**

## **If you think you might have symptoms of asthma or hay fever or if you experience wheezing or coughing with your hay fever**

See your doctor and get these symptoms checked. They will give you a proper diagnosis, help you get an asthma or hay fever Action Plan in place and make sure you have the right medication.

## **If you know you have asthma or hay fever**

If you currently have asthma, you should have regular reviews with your doctor about your asthma to ensure that you have the right medication and that you have good control of your asthma.

It is also important that you have a written Asthma Action Plan and that you see your doctor to ensure that it includes advice for Epidemic Thunderstorm Asthma.

Always carry your reliever medication with you - this is your emergency asthma first aid medication.

If you experience seasonal hay fever, see your doctor or pharmacist about your hay fever care and how you should manage the risk of Epidemic Thunderstorm Asthma, including the need for having reliever medication appropriately available during the pollen season.

## **Know the Asthma First Aid steps**

It's important for everyone to know the symptoms of asthma and what to do if someone is having an asthma attack.

## **Never ignore asthma symptoms like breathlessness, wheezing and tightness in the chest**

Start Asthma First Aid immediately and call Triple Zero (000) for help if symptoms do not get any better or if they start to get worse.

## **Sign up for alerts about high pollen days in your state and territory**

It's best to avoid being outside during thunderstorms in the grass pollen season – especially in the wind gusts that come before the storm. Stay inside and close your doors and windows.

**For more information about thunderstorm asthma and how you can be prepared, visit [asthma.org.au/about-asthma/triggers/](https://asthma.org.au/about-asthma/triggers/)**

# HELPFUL INFORMATION FOR ASTHMA FIRST AID

## **If a person's asthma suddenly gets worse**

If a person's asthma suddenly gets worse or you are concerned, call for emergency assistance - Dial Triple Zero (000) immediately.

Tell the operator a person is having an asthma attack.

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## **If you are in a remote area**

In remote areas, after dialing for emergency assistance and commencing Asthma First Aid, seek medical advice as available, for example, a local community nurse or health clinic.

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## **If you don't know whether the person has asthma**

If the person is finding it hard to breathe and you are not sure if it is asthma, call emergency assistance - Dial Triple Zero (000) immediately and follow the Asthma First Aid Plan.

Giving blue/grey reliever medication to someone who does not have asthma is unlikely to harm them.

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## **Follow up**

If you have had an asthma flare-up or attack, it is important to have your asthma reviewed by your doctor.



# MAKE THE CALL 1800 ASTHMA

Call our free information and support service to speak with an Asthma Educator about your asthma.

**1800 ASTHMA**  
(1800 278 462)



This brochure has been developed for the community by Asthma Australia.

It provides basic facts about:

- Asthma and how you can recognise asthma symptoms
- Keeping people with asthma safe and well
- How you can help someone with asthma
- The implications of having asthma and hay fever and how to manage this

Other Asthma Australia brochures:

- Asthma Medications & Devices
- Things to ask & tell your Doctor
- Asthma Triggers
- Asthma & Pregnancy
- Asthma & Smoking



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All Asthma Australia information is consistent with the National Asthma Council's, The Australian Asthma Handbook (2019).

Asthma Australia information does not replace professional medical advice. People should ask their doctor any questions about diagnosis and treatment.

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