

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*) and makes 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. The exact cause of asthma is still unknown. Factors that may 'trigger' an attack 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 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** – 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** – 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 large 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 flowmeter to check your breathing.
- Stay active and healthy. 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.

This plan could save your life by preventing asthma attacks, warning you when your asthma is getting worse and teaching you what to do. 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 smoky environments

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.

Notes:

Follow up with:

Date and Time-

Name-

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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



Want to know more?

- Ask your local doctor or health care professional
- Contact the Asthma Foundation Queensland
Phone 1800 645 130
www.asthmaqld.org.au
- Contact Quit for help to stop smoking
Call Quitline on 13QUIT (13 78 48)
www.quit.org.au
- Visit the Better Health Channel
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au