

ASTHMA

Asthma is a common disease, affecting people of all ages. It causes the airways of the lungs to become inflamed and narrow, making it hard to breathe. By controlling your asthma, you can reduce the effect it has on your life.

The airways (bronchial tubes) of a person with asthma are more sensitive than normal and overreact, especially when exposed to a "trigger factor". This overreaction causes:

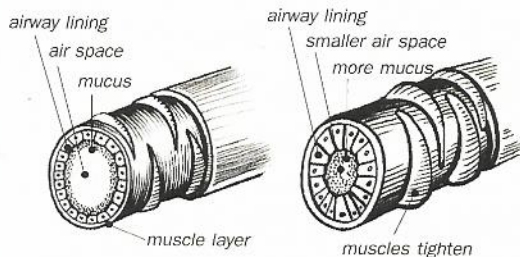
Inflammation

- swelling and irritation of the airway lining
- more mucus is made

Bronchoconstriction

- the muscles in the airway walls tighten

Inflammation and bronchoconstriction narrow the airways, causing asthma symptoms.



NORMAL AIRWAY

AIRWAY IN ASTHMA

For most people with asthma, there are times when symptoms are present and times when they're not. You always have asthma though, because your airways are always sensitive.

SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

- cough - especially at night
- wheezing - noisy breathing
- tightness in the chest
- shortness of breath

You may have one or more of these symptoms. Symptoms are often worse in the early hours of the morning and on waking.

TRIGGER FACTORS

Trigger factors are things which can make asthma worse. Common triggers include:

- house-dust mite, pollens and moulds
- cat skin, fur, saliva
- viral chest infections, e.g. flu/common cold
- exercise
- cold air or sudden temperature change
- irritants e.g. dust, fumes, smoke - especially cigarette smoke
- certain medicines (ask your doctor or pharmacist)
- emotional stress, excitement
- workplace factors, such as dusts, chemicals and gases

Foods and food additives can trigger asthma in some people, although this is uncommon.

ASTHMA MANAGEMENT

Asthma is best managed using a six step plan involving you, your doctor, your pharmacist and your asthma educator.

- 1 Find out how severe your asthma is (ask your doctor).
- 2 Make sure your airways are at their best. You can use a peak flow meter to measure how fast air comes out of your lungs and/or you can keep an eye on your symptoms. Keep an ongoing record of these.
- 3 Find out what triggers your asthma and avoid it if you can.
- 4 Check with your doctor or pharmacist which medicines will help your airways stay at their best. Preventers will help protect you from reacting to triggers you can't avoid.
- 5 Work out an "Action Plan" with your doctor so you know when your asthma is getting worse, what medicines to use and when to get more medical help.
- 6 Have regular check-ups with your doctor. Use this time to talk about any problems and learn about your asthma.

IMPORTANT

Asthma can:

- cause symptoms at night, interrupting sleep
- interfere with your lifestyle e.g. with exercise or socialising
- cause death from an acute attack (rare).

You may be having an asthma attack when:

- your asthma is not relieved by your reliever inhaler
- your reliever doesn't last as long as usual
- you feel tight in the chest
- you are short of breath when speaking, walking or resting
- you wheeze when breathing
- your peak flow reading is near your lowest level set by your doctor or doesn't improve after using your reliever.

If this happens, try to stay calm and follow your "Action Plan". If you have no relief, call your doctor or an ambulance to take you to the nearest hospital emergency room.

MEDICINES

Medicines are used to help control asthma. Asthma medicines are most often inhaled directly into the lungs via inhalers (puffers) or inhaler and spacer. They can also be taken as tablets, capsules or syrups.

There are three main types of asthma medicines:

Relievers, preventers, and symptom controllers.

Relievers

Relievers relieve asthma symptoms. They relax the muscles in the airways, helping you to breathe more easily when you are short of breath. If you need to use your reliever most days, your asthma may not be controlled. See your doctor.

Preventers

Preventers stop you getting asthma symptoms as often by decreasing inflammation and making airways less sensitive to triggers.

Preventers must be used regularly, **even when you feel well**. They cannot be used to relieve an attack.

Symptom controllers

Symptom controllers are used in addition to preventers and relievers to improve control of asthma symptoms.

For more information on medicines used in asthma, see the *Asthma Medicines* Fact Card and talk to your pharmacist and doctor.

SELF CARE

- Don't ignore signs or symptoms of an attack.
- Avoid known triggers (ask your pharmacist).
- When your symptoms are well controlled with a preventer (and perhaps a symptom controller), you'll need to use your reliever less. Always carry your reliever with you though.
- Keep fit. Use your reliever before you exercise if necessary.
- Stop smoking (see Smoking Fact Cards).
- Check with your doctor and pharmacist before stopping or starting any medicine.
- Ask your physiotherapist about relaxed breathing.

Recommended Reading:

PRENDERGAST M., *Understanding Asthma*. Viking, 1995

Other relevant Fact Cards:

- *Asthma Medicines*
- *Colds & Flu*
- Smoking Fact Cards

Contact:

Your doctor (listed under *Medical Practitioners* in the yellow pages of the phone book).

Your Self Care pharmacist. To find: (02) 6281 1366

The Asthma Foundation in your state, and for Asthma Australia brochures: phone 1800 645 130

In case of poisoning, phone the **Poisons Information Centre** on 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

National Asthma Campaign

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

Your **Self Care** pharmacist

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