

Asthma Basic Facts

Staying safe and well with
asthma for people with asthma
and their carers



Asthma
Australia

Breathing

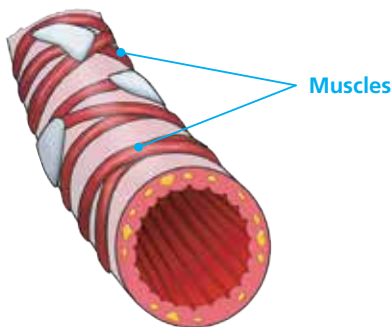
Breathing is how we get air in and out of our body. We all need air to live. Lungs (inside your chest) are the part of the body where breathing happens.

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

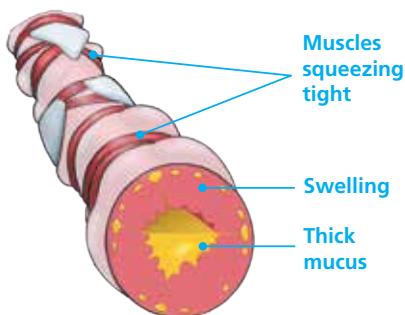
What is asthma?

Asthma is a condition of the airways. People with asthma have sensitive airways which react to triggers that set off their asthma. Their airways swell and get thick with mucus and the muscles around the airway squeeze tight. This makes it hard to breathe.

Normal Airway



Asthma Airway



Asthma facts

- 1 in 10 people in Australia have asthma. That is over 2 million people
- 411 people died from asthma in 2009

To find out the latest asthma facts view the Asthma Snapshot online at aihw.gov.au/asthma

With simple treatment people with asthma can lead normal lives without restriction. Some of Australia's greatest sports men and women have asthma!

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

Symptoms often vary from person to person.

Who gets asthma and why?

Asthma affects people of all ages. Some people get asthma when they are young; others when they are older. The causes are not fully understood, although people with asthma often have a family history of asthma, eczema and hayfever (allergic rhinitis). 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.

Seeing your preferred health professional at least twice a year specifically for your asthma is recommended.

How do your symptoms help you understand your asthma?

Everyone's asthma is different and can change over time: that's why it's important for people with asthma to see their doctor at least twice a year for an asthma checkup and more frequently if they have concerns.

If you have asthma, see your doctor if you:

- Wake up coughing, wheezing or breathless
- Struggle to keep up with normal activity
- Use your reliever three times or more per week
- Are unsure about the way your medications can work best for you.

Your local Asthma Foundation has a wide range of information and courses.

You can:

- Learn about asthma and asthma first aid
- Learn about your asthma symptoms, triggers and medication
- Learn about asthma plans.

To find out more about asthma contact your local Asthma Foundation:

1800 ASTHMA (1800 278 462)
asthmaaustralia.org.au

Do you know your triggers?

Trigger is the word we use to describe something that can set off – or start asthma symptoms. This could be something that you:

- Breathe in
- Catch (e.g cold, flu)
- Feel
- Do
- Eat, drink, take

Every person with asthma has different triggers.

Common asthma triggers include:

- Colds and flu
- Smoke, for example from cigarettes or fire
- Activity and exercise
- Inhaled allergens, for example pollens, moulds, pet allergen, dust mite
- Workplace chemicals
- Dust and pollution
- Changes in temperature and weather
- Emotions, for example laughter or stress
- Some medications
- Work place environment

It is useful to know what triggers or sets off your asthma symptoms.

By recognising what makes your asthma worse, you can plan to avoid these triggers, for example, having a smoke free home.

It is important to know what to do if something makes your asthma worse.

Get an asthma plan from your doctor

An asthma plan tells you how to:

- Respond to your asthma symptoms
- Use your medication
- Know when to seek medical help

How can you help someone with asthma?

Even when people look after their asthma well every day, an asthma attack can happen. Signs of an asthma attack can include:

Mild

- Cough
- Minor difficulty breathing
- No difficulty speaking in sentences

Moderate

- Persistent cough
- Obvious difficulty breathing
- Able to speak in short sentences only

Severe & life threatening

- Gasping for breath
- Pale and sweaty
- May have blue lips
- Speaks only a few words in one breath

Asthma can get worse quickly – or slowly over a longer period of time – even a few days. Asthma first aid can be provided as soon as you notice asthma worsening. Do not wait until asthma is severe to start asthma first aid.

Everyone can learn asthma first aid.

There is an Asthma First Aid plan at the back of this brochure.

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 well. The most common are shown here:

	Reliever – Blue/Grey colour
What it does	Relaxes tight airways for up to 4 hours
How it works	Very quickly – in about 4 minutes
When to take it	— When you have symptoms — Emergency — Before exercise as prescribed
Helpful to know	Carry it with you always in case of symptoms



	Preventer – Autumn/Desert colour
What it does	— Soothes airways — Less swelling — Dries up mucus
How it works	Slowly – days
When to take it	Every day as prescribed — even if you feel well
Helpful to know	The key to keeping well with asthma



	Combination – Purple, red & white
What it does	Acts like a preventer, but also keeps airways open for a longer time
How it works	Fairly quickly, but more improvement with continued use
When to take it	Every day as prescribed
Helpful to know	Prescribed for people who have symptoms even with regular preventer use



If you would like further information on the full range of asthma medications and the different devices used to take these medications, please refer to Asthma Australia's medication and devices brochure.



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 000) immediately.

Tell the operator a person is having an asthma attack.

If you are in a remote area:

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

If you don't know the person has asthma:

If a person is finding it hard to breathe and you do not know if they have asthma or not, call emergency assistance (Dial 000) immediately and then follow the Asthma First Aid Plan.

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

Follow up

If you have had an asthma attack, it is important to follow up with your doctor to discuss your asthma plan, medications and work towards living well with asthma.



Asthma First Aid

1 Sit the person upright

- Be calm and reassuring
- Do not leave them alone



2 Give 4 puffs of blue reliever puffer medication

- Use a spacer if there is one
 - **Shake** puffer
 - Put **1 puff** into spacer
 - Take **4 breaths** from spacer
- Repeat** until **4 puffs** have been taken

Remember: Shake, 1 puff, 4 breaths



3 Wait 4 minutes

- If there is no improvement, give **4 more puffs** as above



4 If there is still no improvement call emergency assistance (DIAL 000)*

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



*If calling Triple Zero (000) does not work on your mobile phone, try 112

Call emergency assistance immediately (DIAL 000)

- If the person is not breathing
- If the person's asthma suddenly becomes worse, or is not improving
- If the person is having an asthma attack and a puffer is not available
- If you are not sure if it's asthma

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



Asthma Australia

To find out more contact your local
Asthma Foundation

1800 ASTHMA (1800 278 462)

asthmaaustralia.org.au

© Asthma Australia 2013 Supported by the Australian Government



Translating and
Interpreting Service
131 450



Asthma
Australia

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

It provides basic facts about:

- What is asthma and how do you recognise it?
- Who gets asthma and why?
- How do people with asthma keep safe and well?
- How can you help someone with asthma?

Other Asthma Australia brochures:

- Asthma medications & devices - a guide
- Under 5s
- Seniors
- Live well checklist
- Could it be asthma?
- 10 Things to tell/ask your doctor

To find out more about asthma contact your local Asthma Foundation

1800 ASTHMA (1800 278 462)

asthmaaustralia.org.au



**Translating and
Interpreting Service
131 450**

All Asthma Australia information is endorsed by our Medical and Scientific Advisory Committee and is consistent with the National Asthma Council Australia clinical guidelines.

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

©Asthma Australia 2012



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 Australia License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/au/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.