



**Asthma**  
Australia

# Asthma Basic Facts

Staying safe and well with asthma.  
For people with asthma and  
their carers.



Contact your local Asthma Foundation  
**1800 ASTHMA Helpline** (1800 278 462)  
[asthmaaustralia.org.au](http://asthmaaustralia.org.au)



# Breathing

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

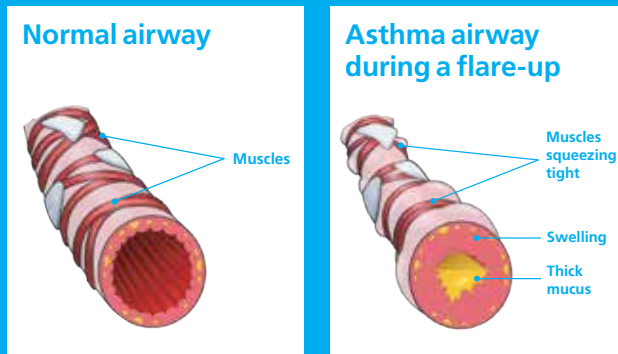
Airways are found in your lungs. Airways make up a network of tubes used to carry air in and out of the body when you are breathing.

## 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 few regular asthma symptoms and very few flare-ups. This means that people with asthma can live healthy, active lives.



## Asthma facts

- 1 in 9 people in Australia have asthma. That is around 2.5 million people (11% of the population)
- 419 people died from asthma in 2014.

To find out the latest asthma facts view the Asthma Snapshot online at [aihw.gov.au/asthma](http://aihw.gov.au/asthma)

With simple treatment, people with asthma can lead normal lives without restriction. People with asthma can exercise and are encouraged to participate in regular physical activities.

## 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 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 entirely understood, although people with asthma often have a family history of asthma, eczema and hayfever. 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.

Good control	Partial control	Poor control
<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 2 days per week	Daytime symptoms more than 2 days per week	Daytime symptoms more than 2 days per week
Need reliever no more than 2 days per week*	Need reliever more than 2 days per week*	Need reliever more than 2 days per week*

\*Not including reliever puffer taken before exercise.

## See your doctor if you:

- Wake up coughing, wheezing or breathless
- Struggle to keep up with normal activity
- Use your reliever more than 2 days per week

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

## 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

## Your local Asthma Foundation can help you:

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

## Contact your local Asthma Foundation:

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## 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 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
- 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 avoided, and it is helpful to do so, e.g., cigarette smoke, moulds, chemicals and pet allergen (for people who are allergic to them).

It is important to know what to do if something makes your asthma worse. Follow your written asthma action plan or see your doctor.

## 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



**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



**Call Ambulance on 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



**Call Ambulance on 000  
Commence Asthma First Aid**

# 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:

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



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



	<b>Combination Preventers</b>
<b>What it does</b>	Is a preventer, but also helps to relax 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



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 Medications & Devices brochure.

It is important to know how to use your inhaler devices properly to ensure you get the maximum benefit from your asthma medication. For example, using a spacer with a puffer is much better than using a puffer alone. Ask your doctor to review your asthma device technique at your next visit. See the Asthma Australia website for more information  
**[asthmaaustralia.org.au](http://asthmaaustralia.org.au)**

# 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.

## 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 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.

## Follow up

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

# 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

**Remember: Shake, 1 puff, 4 breaths**

OR give 2 separate doses of a Bricanyl inhaler (age 6 & over) or a Symbicort inhaler (over 12)



## 3 Wait 4 minutes

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

OR give 1 more dose of Bricanyl or Symbicort inhaler



## 4 If there is still no improvement call emergency assistance Dial Triple Zero

- 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 dose of a Bricanyl or Symbicort every 4 minutes - up to 3 more doses of Symbicort



### Call emergency assistance immediately - Dial Triple Zero (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 reliever is not available
- If you are not sure if it's asthma
- If 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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# 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?
- 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
- Things to ask & tell your doctor
- Things to ask and tell your Pharmacist

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