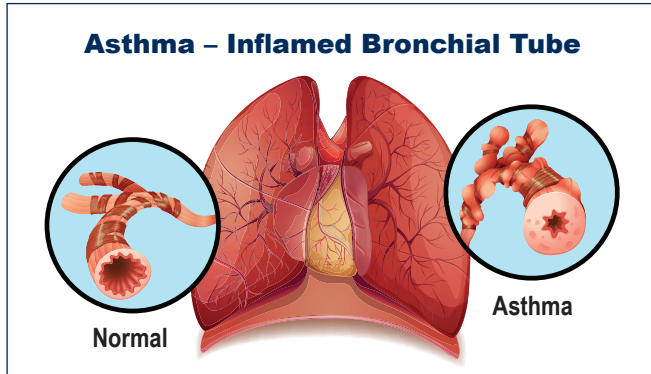


Asthma



Asthma is a condition that affects the airways. It is especially common in New Zealand – one in seven children and one in eight adults are estimated to have asthma. Asthma commonly starts in childhood but can also begin as an adult.

For some people, asthma runs in the family. Over 80% of people with asthma suffer from allergic rhinitis (also known as hay fever), and other conditions, such as eczema or hives (a skin rash characterised by raised red or skin-coloured itchy bumps) are more common in people with asthma.

The airways in people with asthma are more sensitive than normal, and certain substances, called “triggers”, cause the tissues inside these airways to become red and swollen and increase mucus production. This is called inflammation. Inflammation makes the airways narrower, and restricts the flow of air in and out of the lungs, making it difficult to breathe. Common symptoms of asthma include:

- a tight feeling in the chest
- feeling short of breath
- a cough – especially at night or in the morning. Sometimes this may be the only symptom in young children
- wheezing (a whistling/musical noise in the chest).

What effect could asthma have on me?

Asthma affects people differently. Some only get mild symptoms, such as a slight tightening of the chest. Others have more severe symptoms such as tightness, wheezing, or mucus. Symptoms may only come on every now and then, just with exercise, or be present most of the time. Symptoms can also appear suddenly as an “asthma attack”.

Most people with asthma can control their condition well; however, some get severe attacks and need to go to a hospital and every year a few people die of asthma.

Learning about asthma and knowing how to manage your symptoms helps prevent asthma affecting your lifestyle.

Tip: More information about asthma can be found on the Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ’s website at www.asthmafoundation.org.nz, or at Space to Breathe: spacetobreathe.pharmac.govt.nz

What are the triggers for asthma?

A trigger is something that makes asthma worse or brings on an ‘attack’. They differ for everyone but common ones are:

- colds or the ‘flu’
- exercise
- house dust mites
- animal fur or hair
- changes in temperature or the weather, cold air
- emotions (eg, anxiety, excitement) pollen and plants
- moulds
- pollens and plants
- smoke and fumes
- some medicines (eg, ibuprofen, aspirin, beta-blockers).

Do I have asthma?

If you develop difficulty in breathing, a tight feeling in your chest, wheezing or a persistent cough (especially at night or in the morning), you should see your doctor. Your doctor will examine your chest and conduct some breathing tests before deciding if you have asthma.

A small device that you blow into, called a “peak flow meter”, may be used to measure how open or narrow your airways are. You may be given one to take home to help you recognise when your asthma is getting worse.

Asthma action plans

Your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist will write down an Asthma Action Plan for you which tells you what are the signs your asthma is getting worse and what you can do about it, such as increasing the dose of your inhaler depending on your symptoms or peak flow readings. You can also download the free “**My Asthma App**”, created by the Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ, from Google Play or the Apple App Store to your phone or other device.

Managing your asthma

Most people with asthma are treated with inhaler devices. Inhalers deliver a small dose of the drug directly to the airways. If you are prescribed inhalers or other medication for your asthma, take them exactly how your doctor has told you to take them. Also try to keep fit, don't smoke, and avoid asthma triggers.

Reliever inhalers

Relievers work by relaxing the muscle around the airways, opening up the airways and making it easier to breathe. They are also called bronchodilators.

Relievers such as Asthalin, Respigen, SalAir, Ventolin, and Bricanyl work quickly. Use them when your chest feels tight, are coughing or wheezing, or during an asthma attack. Other bronchodilators such as Meterol, Onbrez, and Serevent work more slowly but open up the airways for longer. They are usually taken twice a day and in combination with preventers. **They should not be used during an asthma attack.**

Tip: If you are using your reliever inhaler more than twice a week, your asthma may not be properly controlled – see your doctor or asthma nurse.

Preventer inhalers

A preventer inhaler is taken every day to treat inflammation inside the airways and prevent the symptoms of asthma developing. They reduce the likelihood of an asthma attack but do not give immediate relief of symptoms.

Even if you have no symptoms you need to take your preventer every day because it helps prevent your asthma from getting worse. If you are on the correct dose of preventer you should hardly need to use your reliever at all. Some examples of preventer inhalers are Beclazone, Flixotide, Floair, Pulmicort, and QVAR.

Tip: Rinse your mouth with water and spit it out after using a preventer.

Combination inhalers

Combination inhalers contain both preventer and reliever medicines in one device. Examples include Breo Ellipta, RexAir, Seretide, Symbicort, and Vannair.

Prednisone tablets

Prednisone is an oral steroid medicine used in severe episodes of asthma to reverse swelling in the airways.

Tip: If you need prednisone tablets more than twice a year your asthma is not under control.

Spacers

A spacer is a plastic container that makes your inhaler easier to use and increases the amount of medication that reaches the airway where it is needed. Your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist can demonstrate how to use a spacer properly. You can get a spacer free from your doctor.

Severe asthma

Even if you take your asthma medicines exactly as directed, sometimes your asthma may get worse. Your asthma action plan will tell you what to do. Make sure your whānau/family and friends are aware of this plan.

Tip: If you are distressed with severe asthma ring 111 for an ambulance and say "severe asthma attack".

My asthma checklist:

- Asthma Action Plan
- Spacer to use with my inhalers
- Check I am using my inhaler correctly
- Asthma review each year (more often if needed)
- Flu vaccine every year (it may be free for you)
- See my doctor early if I catch a cold or the flu
- Consider wearing a MedicAlert bracelet

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