

Asthma - what is it?

As we breathe, air moves in and out of the lungs through branching airways.

People with asthma have sensitive or 'twitchy' airways. When they are exposed to certain 'triggers' (e.g. cigarette smoke), their airways narrow making it hard for them to breathe.

The three main factors that cause this narrowing of the airways are:

- The inside lining of the airways becomes red and swollen (inflamed).
- The muscle around the airway tightens.
- Extra mucus is produced.

For more information:

<http://www.pmh.health.wa.gov.au/brochures/consumers/CAHS0709.pdf>

What are the main symptoms of asthma?

- Wheezing - a high pitched raspy sound on breathing
- Coughing
- Shortness of breath
- Tightness in the chest

These symptoms vary from person to person, and from time to time within the same person. Some people have all the symptoms, while some may only have a cough or wheeze. Symptoms can also vary considerably in intensity.

For more information visit: <http://www.asthmawa.org.au>

We don't really know why some people have extra sensitive airways and others don't, but we do know that many people are born with a tendency to develop asthma. There is often a history of asthma, eczema or hay fever in brothers, sisters and parents or close relatives. Asthma can occur for the first time at any age.

There is evidence that contact with certain things, for example cigarette smoke during pregnancy and early childhood, increases the risk of developing asthma. For more information on smoking, pregnancy and asthma visit www.smokefreebaby.org.au.

Asthma and exercise

Children with asthma should be encouraged to exercise or take part in sport, in order to strengthen their chest muscles and to keep fit. For some children, exercise may trigger an asthma attack. Children who cough, wheeze or become extremely breathless with exercise should be seen by a doctor.

Using reliever medication, prescribed by your Doctor, before exercise, will reduce symptoms for most children who have asthma.

It is important to teach children how they can prevent their asthma attacks by using a puffer. Guidelines for the management of asthma and exercise are available through the Asthma Foundation of WA website www.asthmawa.org.au

Asthma – tips for parents

- Find out and control or reduce trigger factors if possible, for example; by reducing exposure to household dust, or keeping pets outside.
- Keep your home and car smoke free.
- Watch for signs of asthma when your child has a cold. Be ready to start the asthma management plan as soon as symptoms appear.
- If your child is unwell, tired and not full of energy, check with a doctor to assess if asthma management needs to be improved or changed.
- Help your child to take as much responsibility as possible for managing his or her own asthma.

For more information visit www.asthmawa.org.au

Asthma first aid

Children with asthma can quickly become seriously ill. Asthma needs to be taken seriously. A child with a serious asthma attack may not sound wheezy, but may be pale, quiet and/or breathing with quick shallow gasps.

If a someone is short of breath and wheezing from asthma, follow his or her Asthma Management Plan, or these first aid steps:

- **Step 1** - Sit the person upright, remain calm and help the person stay calm. Do not leave the person alone.
- **Step 2** - Quickly give four puffs of a reliever puffer (blue puffer), one puff at a time. This is best given through a spacer. Ask the person to take four breaths from the spacer after each puff. Use the puffer on its own if no spacer is available.
- **Step 3** - Wait four minutes. If there is little or no improvement, repeat steps 2 & 3.
- **Step 4** - If there is still little or no improvement, call an ambulance immediately - 000.
- Continue to repeat steps two and three while waiting for the ambulance.

For more information about asthma and asthma first aid, go to
www.asthmawa.org.au

www.oxygen.org.au.