



ASTHMA

HEALTH CARE LEAFLET

What Causes Asthma?

Asthma triggers include:

- **Respiratory tract infections** – such as colds and the flu
- **Allergens** – including pollen, dust mites, animal fur or feathers
- **Airborne irritants** – including cigarette smoke, chemical fumes and atmospheric pollution
- **Medicines** – particularly painkillers such as aspirin and ibuprofen, and beta-blockers sometimes given for high blood pressure or heart disease
- **Emotions** – including stress or laughing
- **Foods containing sulphites** – naturally occurring substances found in some food and drinks, such as concentrated fruit juice, jam, prawns and many processed or pre-cooked meals
- **Weather conditions** – including a sudden change in temperature, cold air, windy days, thunderstorms, poor air quality and hot, humid days
- **Indoor conditions** – including mould or damp, house dust mites and chemicals in carpets and flooring materials
- **Exercise**
- **Food allergies** – including allergies to nuts or other food items

Asthma can develop at any age, including in young children and elderly people.

How Is Asthma Treated?

Treatment is based on two goals:

- Relieving symptoms
- Preventing future symptoms and attacks

For most people, this will involve the occasional, or daily, use of medications, usually taken using an inhaler.

Inhalers

Asthma medicines are usually given by inhalers – devices that deliver medication directly into the lungs as you breathe in.

Some inhalers are pressurised canisters – similar to a spray deodorant or air freshener. You press the inhaler while breathing in, so the vapour containing the medication can pass into your lungs.

Some inhalers are not pressurised canisters but contain the medication in dry powder form, usually in a capsule that is punctured when the inhaler is 'primed'. It is not possible to use a spacer with these inhalers and the powder must be inhaled quickly and forcefully if the medication is to reach the lungs.

Spacers

Pressurised canister inhalers can work better if given through a spacer – a hollow plastic or metal container with a mouthpiece at one end and a hole for the inhaler at the other. This can make the medication more effective because much more of it reaches your lungs and much less stays in your mouth or is swallowed.

Relievers and Preventers

Reliever inhalers (usually blue) are taken to relieve asthma symptoms quickly. They are intended only for the relief of symptoms. Everyone with asthma should be given a reliever.

Preventer inhalers (usually brown, red or orange) work over time to reduce the amount of inflammation and sensitivity of the airways and reduce the chances of asthma attacks occurring. They must be used regularly (typically twice or occasionally once daily) and indefinitely to keep asthma under control.

Symptoms of Asthma

The main symptoms of asthma are:

- Wheezing (a whistling sound when you breathe)
- Shortness of breathe
- A tight chest – which may feel like a band is tightening around it
- Coughing

These symptoms are often worse at night and early in the morning, particularly if the condition is not well controlled. They may also develop or become worse in response to a certain trigger.

Asthma Attack

During an asthma attack the symptoms described previously may get worse and inhaler medication may not work as well as it normally does.

In most cases, the following actions will be recommended:

- 1) Take one to two puffs of reliever inhaler immediately
- 2) Sit down and try to take slow steady breaths
- 3) If they do not start to feel better, take two puffs of reliever inhaler (one puff at a time) every two minutes (they can take up to 10 puffs) – this is easier using a spacer if possible
- 4) If they do not feel better after taking their inhaler or if they or you are worried at any time, call 999
- 5) If an ambulance does not arrive within 10 minutes and they are still feeling unwell, repeat step three.

If their symptoms improve and you do not need to call 999, they still need to see a doctor or asthma nurse within 24 hours.

Signs of a particularly severe asthma attack can include:

- Your reliever inhaler is not helping symptoms as much as usual, or at all
- Wheezing, coughing and chest tightness becoming severe and constant
- Being too breathless to eat, speak or sleep
- Breathing faster
- A rapid heartbeat
- Feeling drowsy, exhausted or dizzy
- Lips or fingers turning blue

Call 999 to seek immediate help if someone has symptoms of a severe asthma attack.

Personal asthma plans will have to be reviewed after a severe asthma attack to determine the cause and ways to prevent it happening in the future.