

Asthma, Allergy and Healthy Living

A guide to healthy habits and
lifestyle choices for people with
asthma or allergy



**SENSITIVE
CHOICE**



WHAT IS ASTHMA?

Asthma is a disease of the airways, the small tubes which carry air in and out of the lungs.

When exposed to certain asthma triggers (such as cold air, exercise, pollen and viruses) the sensitive airways react. They can become red and swollen (inflamed) which causes the airway muscle to tighten and produce excess mucus (phlegm). This makes the airways narrow and difficult for a person to breathe.

Common asthma symptoms include:

- ▶ Shortness of breath
- ▶ Wheezing
- ▶ Coughing
- ▶ A feeling of tightness in the chest

Asthma is a manageable health condition. Although there is no cure yet, with good asthma management and education, people with asthma can lead normal, active lives.

Key points

- ▶ People with asthma and those around them shouldn't smoke.
- ▶ Don't let your asthma stop you being physically active. If being physically active causes asthma symptoms, tell your doctor so you can get effective treatment.
- ▶ Healthy eating may help with your asthma.
- ▶ People with asthma should keep their flu shots up to date.
- ▶ Your mental health can affect your asthma, and asthma may affect your mental health. If your asthma is getting you down or if you feel anxious, tell your doctor.
- ▶ It is especially important to manage your asthma carefully during pregnancy because you are breathing for two. Keep taking your asthma medicines as usual, and talk to your doctor as early as possible about your asthma care during pregnancy.



WHAT IS ALLERGY?

Allergies occur when a person's immune system reacts to substances in the environment that are usually harmless to most people. These substances are known as allergens.

Examples of allergens include house dust mites, pollen, mould and pet dander. Sensitivity to allergens can often be identified via blood or skin tests.

Other substances such as perfumes, odours, or cigarette smoke can also trigger asthma in some people, but these do not involve a reaction in the person's immune system. These are called non-allergic irritant triggers, and there are no skin or blood tests for these triggers.

If you are exposed to an allergen that you are sensitive to, you can develop an allergic reaction that leads to redness and swelling, which can be irritating and uncomfortable.

Allergic reactions can affect your:

- ▶ Nose and/or eyes - hay fever (allergic rhinitis and/or conjunctivitis)
- ▶ Skin - eczema or hives
- ▶ Lungs - asthma

Key points

- ▶ Australia has one of the highest incidences of allergy in the world.
- ▶ Of the over two million people in Australia who have asthma, about 80% have allergies like hay fever.
- ▶ Allergy may run in families. 'Atopy' is the genetic or inherited tendency to develop allergic diseases.
- ▶ The best way to manage allergy is to avoid the allergens, which can often be a challenge as allergens are all around us - pollens from grass and weeds, cigarette smoke, or chemicals in cleaners, and other household products.

HEALTHY HABITS CAN HELP YOU MANAGE YOUR ASTHMA AND ALLERGY

This brochure provides information about how healthy habits and lifestyle choices can help with your asthma and allergy.

Taking care of your asthma also involves:

- ▶ Taking your preventer medicine regularly if your doctor has prescribed it
- ▶ Knowing how to use your inhaler (puffer) properly – this could include using a spacer
- ▶ Following your written asthma action plan
- ▶ Avoiding triggers that make your asthma and allergy worse (e.g. tobacco smoke, fumes, or animals that you are allergic to)
- ▶ Seeing your doctor regularly for check-ups
- ▶ Asking your doctor or pharmacist for information and advice about asthma and allergy.

Everyone with asthma or allergy should have their own written asthma action plan and follow it. If you don't have one, ask your doctor.



GO SMOKE-FREE

Smoking and asthma is a dangerous combination.

Smoking or breathing other people's smoke:

- ▶ Damages your lungs
- ▶ Makes asthma harder to manage
- ▶ Can reduce the effectiveness of medicines
- ▶ Increases your risk of asthma flare-ups
- ▶ Damages children's lungs and worsens wheezing, asthma and allergy.

Tobacco smoke that clings to your hair and clothing is still poisonous. Smoking home-grown or illegally produced loose tobacco ('chop-chop') is as harmful as smoking branded cigarettes. Any type of smoke damages your lungs.

If you are planning a pregnancy, you and your partner should stop smoking before the pregnancy to protect your unborn baby. Protect kids' growing lungs by making sure your home and car are smoke-free.

Quitting smoking

- ▶ People with asthma who quit smoking have healthier lungs within just six weeks compared to those that continue to smoke.
- ▶ There are many different methods to help you quit, including gum, patches, medication, coaching or cold turkey. Some people find that using a combination of these makes the difference.
- ▶ Whichever strategy you choose, you don't have to do it alone - there are many ways to get help.
- ▶ Speak to your doctor, pharmacist or asthma & respiratory educator. They can give you advice and support to help you quit smoking successfully.

Smoking stops your asthma medicines working properly



ENJOY A PHYSICALLY ACTIVE LIFESTYLE

Don't let your asthma prevent you from being physically active. Choose an activity you enjoy, as this can help motivate you, and aim for at least 30 minutes of moderately intense physical activity every day or most days. Moderately intense physical activity means any activity that makes you breathe noticeably faster and deeper than usual but does not make you puff or pant.

Asthma symptoms after physical activity are common but treatable, so don't let this put you off being active. If being physically active causes asthma symptoms, tell your doctor so you can find the treatment that works best for you. This could be as simple as taking extra puffs of your reliever before you warm up.

Asthma symptoms should not stop you from participating in sports or physical activity, whether just for fun or more competitively. Many of our Olympic athletes have asthma.

If you have asthma symptoms when you are physically active, there are a few things you can do:

- ▶ Get as fit as possible - the fitter you are, the more you can exercise before asthma symptoms start.
- ▶ Exercise in a place that is warm - avoid cold, dry air if possible.
- ▶ Avoid outdoor exercise when there are high levels of pollen, dust, fumes or pollution.
- ▶ Try to breathe through your nose (not your mouth) when you exercise. This makes the air warm and moist when it reaches your lungs - cold dry air can make symptoms worse.
- ▶ Make sure you warm-up before and cool down after exercising.

If you have asthma symptoms after your warm-up but taking your reliever helps settle them, you may be able to carry on without further symptoms during your session, even if you exercise hard.



Getting more active can make you feel better

Lighten the load on your lungs

Being overweight may make asthma harder to manage, as carrying extra weight puts extra strain on your lungs, and might also worsen asthma.

If you are overweight, losing just 5-10% of your current weight (e.g. 5 or 10 kilograms for a person who weighs 100 kilograms) can improve your asthma, so you get fewer asthma symptoms and need less medicine.

Breathing problems during sleep are common among people who are overweight and can make asthma harder to manage. If you snore or don't feel refreshed after a night's sleep, talk to your doctor.

Gastro-oesophageal reflux disease is common in overweight people. See your doctor if you have reflux, heartburn or indigestion.

Don't let your asthma hold you back!



FOOD ALLERGIES AND ASTHMA

On their own, food allergies rarely cause asthma. Vomiting and hives are the most common reactions to food allergies. Foods may, however, trigger asthma as part of a generalised severe food allergy reaction involving other symptoms in the skin and gut.

Despite what many people think, cow's milk and other dairy foods rarely trigger asthma symptoms in people without milk allergy.

Food additives

Some ingredients in processed foods can set off wheezing in people who are sensitive to these substances. The most common food additive to cause asthma symptoms is metabisulphite, a preservative used in dried fruit and wine. If you have troublesome asthma, it might be worth avoiding foods containing sulphites.

Food reactions

A range of factors can cause bad reactions to food – from allergy to intolerance or enzyme deficiencies.

Most children grow out of their allergy to milk, eggs, wheat and soy. In the case of milk allergy, nearly 90% of children lose their allergy by the age of five.

Allergies to peanuts, tree nuts (such as almonds and cashews), fish and shellfish can be lifelong. These are also the most common foods to cause life-threatening anaphylaxis, the severest allergic reaction.

Food intolerances and enzyme deficiencies (when your body cannot process certain substances) are sometimes mistaken for food allergies. In general, these reactions tend to cause headache, bloating and stomach upset, and are less severe than allergic reactions. They do not cause anaphylaxis.

TRIGGERS FOR ALLERGIES

The most common allergic triggers of asthma are house dust mites, mould, pollen, and pets.

Reducing exposure to your allergen triggers may improve your asthma control and make your asthma symptoms easier to manage.

If you're keen to try, the first step is to know what triggers your allergies so you can focus your efforts in the right area.

Allergen avoidance or reduction strategies should be used in combination with your recommended medicines and do not replace your doctor's advice.

House dust mites

House dust mites are the most common allergen source in Australia and New Zealand's humid regions. They are very small creatures that live in household dust (often in bedding, furniture, fabrics, soft toys, clothing and carpets).

House dust mites like temperatures around 20-25°C and relative humidity around 70-80%, although they can survive outside these ranges.

A typical house dust mite measures 0.2-0.3 millimetres in length, so you can't see them without magnification. They are not parasites and don't bite or suck blood.

Dust mite allergens do not typically remain airborne for long, but activities such as vacuuming, dusting, playing on the floor or moving about in bed will stir them up for a period.

If you have a proven allergy to house dust mites, reducing your exposure is a good idea. This involves killing house dust mites, removing the allergen they produce, and reducing areas where they can live and breed. Using multiple strategies will be more effective than just one.

- ▶ Use a damp or electrostatic cloth to dust hard surfaces, including hard floors.
- ▶ Vacuum carpets and soft furnishings regularly, using a good quality vacuum cleaner (these will mostly have high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters). Ask someone else to do the vacuuming while you leave the room, as vacuuming increases the amount of dust mite allergen in the air for up to 20 minutes.
- ▶ Clean window coverings regularly (venetian blinds or flat blinds are easier to clean than heavy curtains. Washable curtains or external shutters are other options).
- ▶ Consider leather or vinyl lounges instead of fabric.
- ▶ Wash sheets and pillowcases regularly in water hotter than 55°C.
- ▶ Use bedding products, including mattress, pillow and quilt protectors, treated with an anti-microbial.
- ▶ Wash soft toys regularly in water hotter than 55°C. Freezing soft toys and other small items overnight kills the mites but doesn't remove the allergen.
- ▶ As well as being a source of allergens themselves, pets also contribute to dander on which the mites feed.



Mould

Air filters and ionizers have been shown to reduce airborne mould, but how this affects asthma control is uncertain.

There are things you can do around your home that may help reduce mould exposure:

- ▶ Remove visible mould by cleaning with naturally fermented white vinegar (mould is not always visible and some porous surfaces may need to be removed and discarded).
- ▶ Use high-efficiency air filters – these may be integrated into air-conditioning, heat-recovery ventilation systems, or in stand-alone air purifiers.
- ▶ Ensure adequate natural ventilation including the use of extractor fans.
- ▶ Seal leaks in bathrooms and roofs.
- ▶ Clear overflowing gutters.
- ▶ Remove indoor pot plants - these can promote mould growth.
- ▶ Dry or remove wet carpets.
- ▶ Treat rising damp as soon as it is detected.
- ▶ Avoid the use of organic mulches, and compost heaps.

Remove visible mould by cleaning with fermented white vinegar

Pollen

Plant pollen is well known as a trigger for seasonal hay fever (allergic rhinitis) and seasonal allergic conjunctivitis. Up to four out of five people with asthma also have allergies like hay fever – either at certain times of the year or all year round.

The main culprits are pollen from imported grasses, weeds and trees, which are wind-pollinated. Australian native plants are usually not the culprit, although there are exceptions, such as cypress pine. Allergies are not usually triggered by flowering plants as they produce less pollen (which is transported by bees) than wind-pollinated plants.

An itchy, runny or blocked nose due to allergies can make your asthma harder to control, make sure you talk to your doctor or pharmacist about it.

Managing conditions with the help of your doctor and taking prescribed medicines as directed is important. There are also a number of over-the-counter products that may alleviate symptoms.

If you live in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane or Canberra, check the pollen forecast (available during the main pollen season) in each of those cities.

To reduce pollen exposure:

- ▶ Keep windows closed.
- ▶ Do not dry washing on an outside clothes-line on a high pollen day.
- ▶ Be wary of indoor plants - they tend not to be the source of pollen but may cause symptoms because of mould growth, or fragrances.
- ▶ Do not mow the grass yourself and stay inside when it is being mown. If mowing is unavoidable, wear a mask.
- ▶ Consider an air purifier if you still experience symptoms indoors.

- ▶ Consider planting a low allergen garden with plants pollinated by birds or insects as these are less likely to trigger hay fever or asthma.
- ▶ If you are sensitive to particular weeds or trees that are outside your bedroom window, have them removed.
- ▶ Use your prescribed medicines before going outdoors, and keep your asthma reliever with you.
- ▶ Try to avoid going outdoors on days with high pollen counts, on windy days, or before and after thunderstorms. Otherwise, try and stay indoors until after midday as pollen is released in the morning.
- ▶ Wear sunglasses (or normal glasses) to protect your eyes.



Pets & allergies

Some people are allergic to pet allergens. The severity of the allergic reaction varies among people and depends on the circumstances, and may not happen straight away.

If you are not sure whether you're allergic to animals, your GP or an allergist can test you using skin and blood tests.

Dogs and cats are the most common cause of pet allergies. Furry little friends such as guinea pigs, rabbits, birds, mice and rats can also trigger asthma or allergies in some people. If you are allergic to pet allergens, you may like to consider turtles, hermit crabs, fish or reptiles as pets.

While many people think that the pet's fur or hair is the problem, it isn't the source - although it can carry the allergens.

The main source of allergen in dogs is saliva and in cats are the sebaceous glands in the cat's skin. Dander (shed skin particles) is also a source of allergens. As all dogs and cats have dander and secretions, all breeds/types can potentially cause allergies.

However, some animals may pose less of a risk than others:

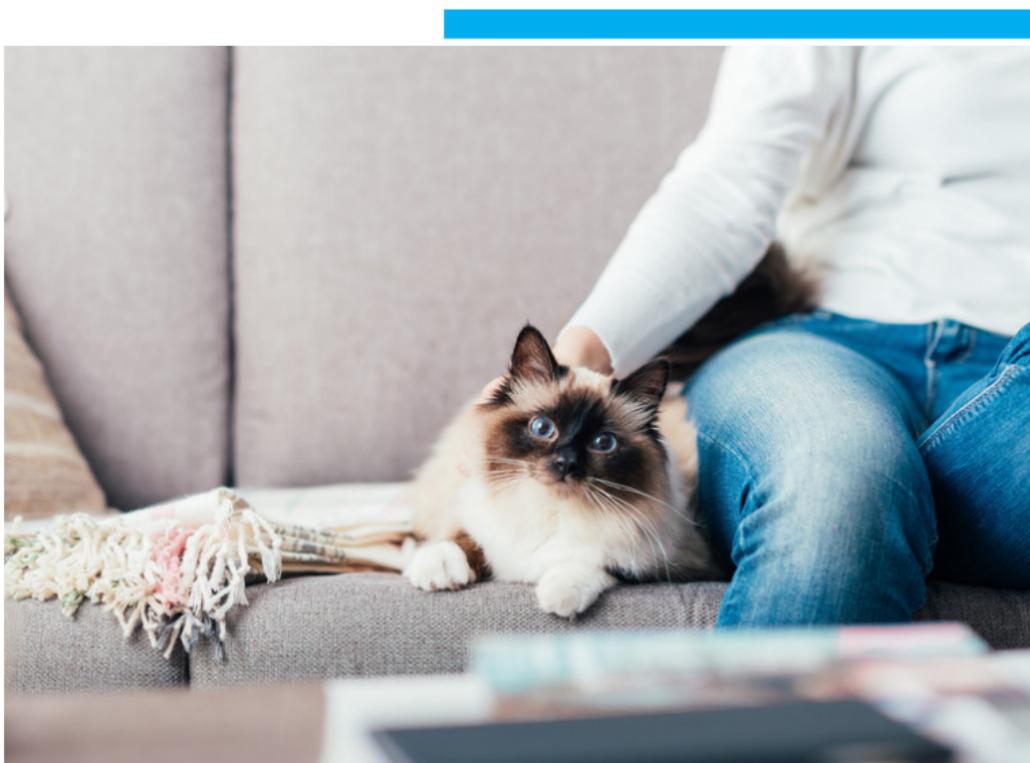
- ▶ Some breeds produce less allergen or shed less hair, which can reduce the spread of allergens.
- ▶ Smaller dogs generally produce less allergen than larger dogs, simply because they typically produce less saliva and have less skin.
- ▶ Short haired cats may pose less risk compared to long-haired ones.

Cat allergy is more common (and typically worse) than dog allergy.

Cats lick themselves which helps spread the allergen. The allergen is sticky so it glues itself to hairs, dust particles and parts of the home. Cat allergen can exist for years in homes that no longer have a cat - or have never had one!

If your pet lives indoors, keeping it out of the bedroom significantly reduces allergen levels in those areas. You can also try to reduce exposure to allergens:

- ▶ Always wash your hands after touching or feeding your pet (don't touch your face before washing your hands).
- ▶ Keep pets off chairs, sofas and other soft furnishings.
- ▶ Vacuum any carpets, curtains and upholstery regularly using a vacuum with a motorised brush and a HEPA filter.
- ▶ Clean hard floors with a damp cloth or a steam mop.
- ▶ Clean air-conditioning and heating ducts.
- ▶ Wash clothing, and pet and human bedding regularly in hot water.
- ▶ Groom (e.g. brush) your pet regularly.



What is the Sensitive Choice program?

Sensitive Choice is a community service program created by the National Asthma Council Australia for all of us who want to breathe purer, cleaner, fresher air and reduce allergic reactions.

The program is designed to help you identify asthma and allergy-aware products and services. You'll find the Sensitive Choice symbol on hundreds of products - from bedding to building products, cleaning agents to carpets, air purifiers and vacuum cleaners to the paint you put on your walls.

Why choose a Sensitive Choice product?

Products and services with the Sensitive Choice blue butterfly have been assessed by an independent panel and may be a better choice for people with asthma and allergies.

Funds raised by the Sensitive Choice program contribute to research and education led by the National Asthma Council to reduce the health, social and economic impacts of asthma and allergies both in Australia and overseas.

