

# Asthma

& Healthy Living

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



FOR PATIENTS & CARERS

# 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, smoke, exercise, pollen, and viruses) the sensitive airways react. They can become red and swollen (inflamed) which causes the airway muscles 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 currently no cure, good asthma management and education can ensure people with asthma can lead normal, active lives.

## Key points

**Smoking and asthma is a dangerous combination. People with asthma and those around them shouldn't smoke.**

Healthy eating may help with your asthma. Aim for plenty of fruit, vegetables and fish, choose lean meats and reduced-fat dairy foods, and limit foods high in saturated fat (e.g. fast foods).

Don't let your asthma stop you being physically active. Consider getting involved in structured exercise training, as people with asthma who participate in this sort of training feel better. If being physically active causes asthma symptoms, tell your doctor so you can get effective treatment.

Being overweight may make asthma harder to manage. Losing just 5 or 10 kilograms could really improve 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. Talk to your doctor if you have been feeling down, anxious, or aren't enjoying those things you normally do enjoy.

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.



## Healthy habits can help you manage your asthma

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

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 things that make your asthma worse (e.g. tobacco smoke, other fumes, or animals that you are allergic to)
- seeing your doctor regularly for asthma checkups
- asking your doctor or pharmacist for information and advice about asthma.

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

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Losing just a bit of weight could make you feel better and breathe more easily

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## 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
- stops asthma medicines working properly
- increases your risk of asthma attacks or flare-ups
- damages children's lungs and worsens wheezing and asthma.

Tobacco smoke that clings in 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. People with asthma who quit smoking have healthier lungs within just 6 weeks.

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.

### Tips for quitting

Talk to your doctor, pharmacist or asthma and respiratory educator.

Phone Quitline on 13 78 48 (13 QUIT), visit the Commonwealth Government's anti smoking campaign website: [quitnow.gov.au](http://quitnow.gov.au), or visit the Cancer Institute NSW "I can quit" website: [icanquit.com.au](http://icanquit.com.au)

Using medicines to help you quit (for example, using nicotine replacement patches or gum) could double your chance of success.

Don't give in and have 'just one puff' – it could set back all your hard work. Learn to manage stress while quitting – Quitline can help you.

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Smoking stops your asthma puffers working

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## Enjoy healthy eating

Fresh fruit and vegetables are full of antioxidants, which may improve your lung health and help avoid asthma attacks. Aim for 5 servings of vegetables and 2 servings of fruit every day. Eating fish often may help with your asthma too.

Eating too much saturated fat may prevent your asthma medicines working properly. Limit the amount of convenience foods high in saturated fat, and choose lean meats, skinless chicken and reduced-fat dairy foods.

Milk and other dairy foods don't cause or worsen asthma symptoms.

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### Healthy eating might help your asthma

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## Enjoy a physically active lifestyle

Don't let your asthma stop you 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 and 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.

Consider getting involved in structured exercise training, as people with asthma who participate in this sort of training may feel better.

If you have asthma symptoms when you are physically active or exercise, then there are some 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 and humid – avoid cold, dry air if possible.
- Avoid exercising where there are high levels of pollens, dusts, 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 do a proper warm-up before exercising. If you have asthma symptoms after your warm-up but taking your reliever helps settle them, then you may be able to carry on without getting symptoms again during your session, even if you exercise hard.

After you exercise, do cooling down exercises while breathing through your nose and covering your mouth (especially if the air is cold and dry).

If you participate in competitive sports, make sure you check which asthma medicines you are allowed to take by contacting the Australian Sports Anti-Doping Authority ([asada.gov.au](http://asada.gov.au)) and the World Anti-Doping Authority ([wada-ama.org](http://wada-ama.org)).

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### Getting more active can make you feel better

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## 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 really improve your asthma, so you get fewer asthma symptoms and need less medicine.

Breathing problems during sleep are also 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 so see your doctor if you have reflux, heartburn or indigestion.

## Avoid the flu

People with asthma should keep their flu shots up to date. Ask your doctor which vaccinations are recommended for your age group and health conditions.

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### Keep up your flu shots

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## Take care of your mental health

Asthma can be harder to manage or cope with if you have depression or another mental health condition. Asthma can also affect your mental health.

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### If your asthma is getting you down or if you feel anxious, tell your doctor

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Talk to your doctor if you have been feeling down or anxious, or if you haven't been able to feel interested in things you normally enjoy. You can also contact *beyondblue* for more information on depression and anxiety, and where to get help (see *Further information*).

If problems with your asthma are getting you down, talk to your doctor. Your local Asthma Foundation can also provide support, education and information to help you manage your asthma (see *Further information*).

Learning how to manage your asthma and having regular asthma check-ups with your doctor can make you feel better, especially if you are experiencing depression and anxiety. Regular exercise can also help reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression in people with asthma.

## Plan a healthy pregnancy with asthma

If you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy, you need to know some asthma facts:

- It is especially important to manage your asthma carefully during pregnancy. Untreated asthma, poorly controlled asthma or serious flare-ups during pregnancy put mothers and babies at risk.
- You should not stop taking your asthma medicines. Talk to your doctor as soon as possible to plan your asthma care during pregnancy.
- Asthma can change during pregnancy. Your doctor may advise you to have asthma check-ups more often while you are pregnant.
- Both parents should stop smoking before the woman becomes pregnant to protect the unborn baby.

Women with asthma who are planning a pregnancy should see their doctor to update their written asthma action plan before the pregnancy.

Before becoming pregnant is also a good time to talk to your doctor or pharmacist about all the medicines you are taking for asthma and any other condition (including any non-prescription medicines and complementary medicines). Ask about which medicines you should keep taking during pregnancy, and whether there are any safer options.

If you are pregnant and have asthma, or have had asthma at any time in your life, make sure your obstetrician and midwife know you have asthma.

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### If you can't breathe, neither can your baby.

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If you have asthma symptoms while pregnant, act immediately: take your reliever puffer straight away and contact your doctor if symptoms return. If you can't breathe normally within a few minutes of taking your reliever puffer during an asthma attack, ask someone to call 000 for an ambulance ([nationalasthma.org.au/emergency](http://nationalasthma.org.au/emergency)).



## Further information

- Talk to your doctor or pharmacist
- Visit the National Asthma Council Australia website: [nationalasthma.org.au](http://nationalasthma.org.au)
- Contact your local Asthma Foundation: **1800 ASTHMA (1800 278 462)** [asthmaaustralia.org.au](http://asthmaaustralia.org.au)

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## Healthy living resources

- Commonwealth Government's anti-smoking campaign site: [quitnow.gov.au](http://quitnow.gov.au)
- Quitline: 13 78 48
- Dietitians Association of Australia: [daa.asn.au](http://daa.asn.au)
- Heart Foundation: [heartfoundation.org.au](http://heartfoundation.org.au)
- *beyondblue* info line 1300 224 636 and website: [beyondblue.org.au](http://beyondblue.org.au)

Although all care has been taken, this brochure is only a general guide; it is not a substitute for individual medical advice/treatment. The National Asthma Council Australia expressly disclaims all responsibility (including negligence) for any loss, damage or personal injury resulting from reliance on the information contained.

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### Note for health professionals:

Visit the National Asthma Council Australia website to:

- order printed copies of this brochure
- access the related information paper for health professionals