



Asthma

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First Aid for Life



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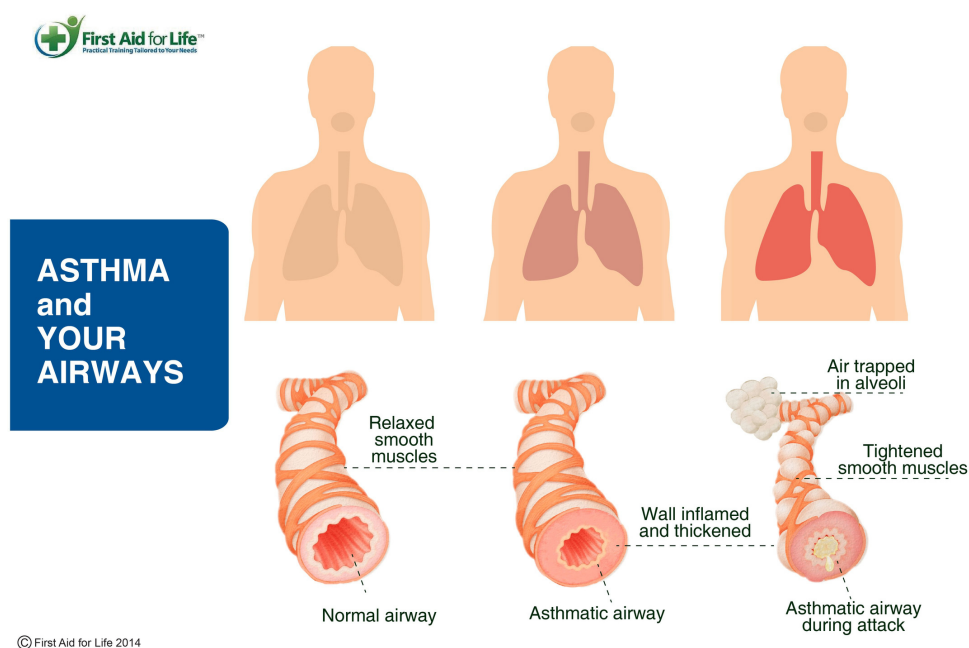


What is asthma?

We all know people who have asthma. However, very few of us would know what to do if someone close by started to have a serious asthma attack and was struggling to breathe. Read on to find out what asthma is, what may trigger it and how to help someone having an asthma attack.

Asthma is an extremely common chronic, and potentially life-threatening, condition. It affects nearly 10% of children and a large number of adults too. There are over 25,000 emergency hospital admissions for asthma amongst children in the UK every year and many more when you include adult asthmatics. Many asthmatics find that there is a particular time of year when their asthma becomes more difficult to control. For some the cold weather is a challenge, but for others Spring is particularly difficult.

When someone has asthma, their airways go into spasm which causes tightness of the chest. The linings of the airways become inflamed and produce phlegm leading to extreme difficulty in breathing.



What are the triggers?

There are many different triggers for asthma attacks. Many asthmatics are well aware of their trigger points. However, they may not always be able to avoid them.

Pollen and pollution are increasingly responsible for triggering asthma. Many people find a worsening of their symptoms in Spring, combined with the onset of hay fever. There are many species of grasses, trees and weeds in the UK. Some people are particularly sensitive to some and do not react at all to others. There is also huge variation around the country as to when pollen is released. People can begin to suffer from hay fever as early as January. About 20% of people with hay fever are allergic to birch tree pollen and this, as well as oak and plane trees, are responsible for many unpleasant symptoms and can exacerbate asthma.



Pollen

Grass pollens are the most common cause of hay fever and usually affect people in May, June and July. Weed pollens (such as nettles and docks) usually release pollen from early spring to early autumn.

If you know pollen is a trigger for your asthma, speak to your GP or asthma nurse. The Met Office issues really useful pollen advice.

Alcohol

Alcohol can make it harder to control your asthma.

Alcohol contains histamine which is also released as part of the body's reaction to allergies. It is therefore strongly suggested that alcohol can increase the sensitivity of the body to pollen and other allergens. It is advisable to avoid alcohol if you have are prone to allergic reactions or are asthmatic.



Symptoms of asthma

- Coughing
- Wheezing
- Shortness of breath
- Tightness in the chest
- Difficulty breathing out
- Increase in sticky mucus and phlegm

It's important to note that not everyone will get all of these symptoms.

How to help during an asthma attack

If someone is having an asthma attack, always follow the instructions outlined on their medication. However, if they do not have them to hand, these are the steps to follow. These guidelines are suitable for both children and adults.



HOW TO DEAL with an ASTHMA ATTACK

Step 1

Help the casualty to take their usual dose of reliever (usually blue) inhaler immediately, preferably through a spacer.



Step 2

Sit the casualty upright
Get them to take slow steady breaths
Keep calm and try to keep them calm
Do not leave them unattended

Have the symptoms improved immediately?

No

Yes

Step 3

Continue to give two puffs of reliever inhaler every two minutes, up to 10 puffs

Continue to sit with the casualty until they are feeling completely well and can go back to previous activity

If the casualty is a child, parents/carers should be informed



Step 4

If the casualty does not start to feel better after taking the reliever inhaler as above or if you are worried at any time call 999



Step 5

If an ambulance does not arrive within 10 minutes repeat step 3 while you wait

If the casualty is a child, parents/carers should be informed

Signs of an asthma attack can include any of these

Coughing
Being short of breath
Wheezy breathing
Being unusually quiet
Tightness in their chest - some children express this as tummy ache

Be calm and reassuring as reducing the stress and keeping the casualty calm really helps them to control their symptoms. Panic can increase the severity of an attack.

1. Take one to two puffs of the reliever inhaler (usually blue), immediately. Use a spacer device if available. Stay as calm as you can and encourage them to stay calm too.
2. Sit them down, loosen any tight clothing and encourage them to take slow, steady breaths.
3. If they do not start to feel better, they should take more puffs of their reliever inhaler.
4. If they do not start to feel better after taking their inhaler as above, or if you are worried at any time, call 999/112. They should keep taking the reliever inhaler whilst waiting for the paramedics to arrive.
5. If the person has been prescribed an adrenaline auto-injector and you suspect the asthma attack may be due to an allergic reaction and the reliever inhaler is not working, administer the AAI. Administer the injection into the upper, outer part of their thigh according to the instructions. If you are worried in any way, check with the emergency services and keep them informed and updated as to the casualty's condition.

Note!

Encouraging someone to sit upright is generally helpful when dealing with breathing problems. Sitting the wrong way round on a chair may be a good position for them. Do **not** take them outside for fresh air if it is cold. Cold air makes symptoms worse.



What to do after an attack

They should make an appointment with their doctor or asthma nurse for an asthma review, ideally within 48 hours of their attack.

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