

National Asthma awareness events are planned for May this year, in the UK Asthma awareness week starts on 1st of May and World Asthma Day on May 5th. How much do you really know about asthma and its effect on health?

What is asthma?

Asthma is a condition that affects the airways – the small tubes (bronchi) that carry air in and out of the lungs.

Asthma causes the bronchi to become inflamed and swollen. If you have asthma, the bronchi are more sensitive than normal and certain substances or triggers can irritate them. Common triggers include house dust mites, animal fur, pollen, tobacco smoke, cold air and chest infections.

When the bronchi are irritated, they become narrow and the muscles around them tighten, which can increase the production of sticky mucus, or phlegm. This makes it difficult to breathe and causes wheezing and coughing, and it may make your chest feel tight.

The severity of the symptoms of asthma differs from person to person, from mild to severe. The narrowing of the airways is usually reversible – occurring naturally, or through the use of medicines. However, for some people with chronic (long-lasting) asthma, the inflammation may lead to an irreversible obstruction of the airways. 5.4 million people in the UK are currently receiving treatment for asthma, there is a person with asthma in one in five households in the UK.

A severe onset of symptoms is known as an asthma attack, or 'acute asthma exacerbation'. Asthma attacks can be life-threatening and may require hospital treatment.

Symptoms & Triggers

Badly controlled asthma can have an adverse impact on your quality of life and result in fatigue, underperformance or absence from work (in the UK, asthma accounts for an estimated 12.7 million work days lost each year), psychological problems including stress, anxiety and depression. The usual symptoms of asthma are:

- > coughing
- > wheezing
- > shortness of breath
- > tightness in the chest

Not everyone will get all of these symptoms. Some people experience them from time to time; a few people may experience these symptoms all the time. It may be impossible to avoid all of your triggers but once you have identified them, there are things you can do to help you reduce unnecessary symptoms and better control your asthma. Sometimes the link is obvious, for example when your symptoms start within minutes of coming into contact with a cat or dog. But some people can have a delayed reaction to an asthma trigger, so some extra detective work may be needed.

Treatment



Everyone with diagnosed asthma should have a reliever inhaler provided to them by their GP. Reliever inhalers are usually blue. Relievers are medicines that are taken immediately to quickly relax the muscles surrounding the narrowed airways allowing the airways to open wider, making it easier to breathe again. Relievers are essential in treating asthma attacks. You should take a dose of reliever inhaler when you are having asthma symptoms.

Preventers control the swelling and inflammation in the airways, stopping them from being so sensitive and reducing the risk of severe attacks. Not everyone with asthma will be prescribed preventer medicine. Preventer inhalers usually contain a low dose of steroid medicine. Preventers are usually brown, red or orange inhalers.

If your asthma is under control you are more likely to have a better quality of life and be more able to do the things you want to. Signs that your asthma is not well controlled include:

- > Waking at night with coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath or a tightness in the chest.
- > Having to take time off work because of your asthma.
- > Finding it difficult to breathe, and breathing short shallow breaths.
- > Needing more and more reliever treatment.
- > Finding that your reliever does not seem to be working.
- > Having to take your reliever more frequently than every four hours.
- > Feeling that you cannot keep up with your usual level of activity or exercise.

If you notice any of these symptoms you should follow your personal asthma action plan, as this should help you to get your symptoms back under control. If this does not work, you should see your doctor or asthma nurse.



What is occupational asthma?

Every year in the UK, up to 3,000 people develop asthma because they are exposed to dangerous substances at work. This is called occupational asthma. Some substances that you might come across at work can actually cause asthma. The condition can take weeks, months or even years to develop, depending on the person and the substance.

Which substances cause occupational asthma?

Substances that can cause asthma are called respiratory sensitisers. Below is a list of some of the main ones and the jobs where you are most likely to come across them:

- > Chemicals called Isocyanates are the most common cause of occupational asthma in the UK. There are many jobs in which you might be exposed to these chemicals, particularly spray painting, foam moulding using adhesives, and making foundry cores and surface coatings.
- > Dust from flour and grain (pictured). Industrial baking, farm work and grain transport.
- > Wood dust, particularly from hard wood dusts and western red cedar. Carpentry, joinery and sawmilling.
- > Colophony – this is widely present in soldering fumes but also in glues and some floor cleaners. Electronics industry.
- > Dust from latex rubber. Any job involving latex gloves, such as nursing or dentistry.
- > Dust from insects and animals, and from products containing them. Laboratory work, farm work.

There are over 200 other respiratory sensitisers and more are being identified all the time. The [Health & Safety Executive](#) (HSE) publishes a list of the best known offenders. The list is not exhaustive and is updated regularly.


How is occupational asthma diagnosed?

Occupational asthma may be diagnosed:

- > If your asthma is worse during the working week, though not necessarily at work itself or your symptoms get worse after work, or you find your sleep is disturbed during the night.
- > Your symptoms may improve when you have been away from work for several days or on holiday.
- > If occupational asthma is suspected, you should be referred to a specialist.

General Health

Most people with asthma do not have to follow a special diet. In some cases, certain foods including cow's milk, eggs, fish, shellfish, yeast products, nuts, and some food colourings and preservatives, can make symptoms worse. People with asthma are also recommended to avoid Royal Jelly products as they may trigger symptoms. If you think you have a food allergy, contact your doctor or nurse for further advice. Losing weight can help in managing asthma, and combined with a more active lifestyle, can also help to improve lung function.



Smoking is bad news for anyone concerned about their health, but especially for people with asthma. Also, if you smoke as a teenager you are increasing the risk of your asthma persisting. If you smoke around children or while you are pregnant you are putting them at risk of developing asthma. If you smoke and have asthma you are increasing your risk of an asthma attack, you could be permanently damaging your airways and you could be blocking the benefit of your asthma medicines.

Tips for exercising with asthma:

- > Make sure the people you are exercising with know you have asthma.
- > Increase your fitness levels gradually.
- > Always have your reliever inhaler with you when you exercise.
- > If exercise triggers your asthma use your reliever inhaler immediately before you warm up.
- > Ensure that you always warm up and down thoroughly.
- > Try not to come into contact with things that trigger your asthma.
- > If you have symptoms when you exercise, stop, take your reliever inhaler and wait until you feel better before starting again.
- > If you use preventer medicine, take it as prescribed by your doctor or asthma nurse.

Further Information

NHS - <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/asthma/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

Asthma UK – Web: <http://www.asthma.org.uk/> Tel: 0800 121 62 44