

<http://www.psa.org.au/selfcare>

Learning to breathe a little easier.

For about 2 million Australians regular, routine, trouble-free breathing is not all that easy. For these people, asthma is part of their day-to-day life. These statistics make asthma one of the most common medical conditions in Australia.

Symptoms of asthma include shortness of breath, wheeze, chest tightness and persistent, dry, irritating cough - symptoms which can also indicate other conditions; but when occurring together make asthma the likely diagnosis; especially if triggered by exercise, allergy, viral infection or if worse at night. Diagnosis can be confirmed by the doctor using a lung function test known as spirometry.

Sadly, despite the effective management strategies now available, many people continue to suffer unnecessarily; and through ignorance and/or complacency put themselves at risk of serious, sometimes fatal, consequences.

Asthma is thought to result from a combination of inherited and environmental factors - environmental factors such as inhaled grasses and pollens, mould, dust mite and their droppings, the hair and dead skin cells from domestic animals (cats seem to be a particular problem) and exposure to tobacco smoke; both active and the passive form. These trigger factors are similar to those which cause hay fever in many people. In fact, most people with asthma also get hay fever and many people with hay fever have asthma, too. So, if you sniffle and sneeze and then maybe get a blocked-up nose, and sometimes get watery, itchy eyes; and if you occasionally get a bit wheezy as well, you should definitely get along to your doctor for a check-up.

Asthma occurs more often in children, but can actually begin at any age. Children who have eczema, particularly when occurring with hay fever, are nine times more likely to develop allergic asthma later in life. This is one of the conclusions from a recent study published online in the *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology*.

In what is known as the Tasmanian Longitudinal Health Study (TAHS), participants were assessed in 1968 at age seven and then followed up in 2004 when they were in their mid 40s. Melbourne-based PhD student, Pamela Martin, who was involved with analysing the survey results, said that implications of this study are that prevention and rigorous treatment of childhood eczema and hay fever may prevent the persistence and development of asthma.

Both with asthma and hay fever, if the triggers can be identified then we should take whatever steps possible to avoid them. Exercise is the exception. People with exercise-induced asthma should still exercise, but will reduce the possibility of an asthma attack by using a reliever medicine before exercising.

Some trigger factors are very difficult to avoid. Changes in weather or air temperature (especially during the night or early hours of the morning) affect some people with asthma; emotional stress and even laughter can also trigger asthma. Viral upper respiratory infections can be a problem (even more troublesome at this time of year), so all people with asthma should have an annual flu vaccine.

Some medicines are known to trigger or worsen asthma. These include some non-prescription and complementary medicines. In particular, Royal Jelly and echinacea should be avoided, but people with asthma should be careful with any herbal product. And importantly, there is no good evidence yet to recommend any herbal or other complementary product to treat asthma.

For more evidence-based information on how best to manage asthma, and how to make breathing just that little bit easier, ask for one of the "fact cards" on *Asthma* and *Asthma Medicines* from pharmacies providing the Self Care health information. Check out the website www.psa.org.au for the nearest location.