



The Asthma Foundation of Queensland

PO Box 394 Fortitude Valley QLD 4006

Freecall: 1800 645 130 Telephone: 07 3252 7677 Facsimile: 07 3257 1080

Email: [info@asthmaqld.org.au](mailto:info@asthmaqld.org.au) Internet: [www.asthmaqld.org.au](http://www.asthmaqld.org.au)

## Asthma & the over 50's

### Is asthma any different in older people?

It can be. Even if people have had asthma all their life, they may find that it can start affecting them in different ways as they get older. Some people are diagnosed with asthma for the first time later in life. This is called 'adult-onset' asthma.

### How do I know it's really asthma?

Everybody's asthma is different, but the most common symptoms are:

- Wheezing
- Shortness of breath
- Tight chest
- Coughing

It can be difficult however, to tell the difference between asthma and other conditions that cause similar symptoms such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (chronic bronchitis & emphysema) or heart disease. Always tell your doctor if you have any smoking history, even if you gave up years ago.

To diagnose asthma, the doctor may have you:

- perform a lung function test to find out how well your airways are working
- record your symptoms for a few weeks with a symptom diary or a peak flow meter
- undertake a trial of asthma medication for a few weeks to see if it improves your symptoms

As a result of these tests, the doctor will determine if your symptoms are asthma and decide what asthma medication you may need to take on a regular basis.

### Isn't my breathlessness just a sign that I am getting older?

Not necessarily. People often mistakenly think that getting breathless is due to their age or lack of fitness. It may be a symptom of asthma (which can be relieved with asthma medication) or it could indicate other problems with your chest or heart. If you are experiencing breathlessness it is extremely important to tell your doctor sooner rather than later.

### Should I stop physical activity if I have asthma?

No. Being physically active is important for everyone - you don't have to put on leotards and join an aerobics class necessarily, but something as simple as taking a walk each day can help to keep you fit and healthy. Not only will it help improve how well you cope with your asthma, but it helps to keep your heart fit, reduce your risk of diabetes and helps to reduce your risk of falling.



queensland  
**asthma**  
network

the asthma **3+** visit plan



helping people breathe better

See your doctor before starting on any new physical activity program. They may suggest that you take two puffs of your reliever medication before you start exercising. This can help stop asthma symptoms from beginning. Remember to take your reliever with you as well, just in case you need to use it again.

Physical activity should be avoided when you are unwell with your asthma (eg. when you have a cold), but once it is under control – it is OK to start again.

### **How can I avoid the flu?**

Whilst you can try and avoid coming into contact with people who have a cold, flu or other viral infections, it may be helpful to consider having the flu vaccination each year. You can discuss this with your doctor. If you are an older person with severe asthma, the doctor may talk to you about a pneumonia vaccination.

### **Are there any medications I should avoid?**

A number of prescription and over the counter medications can make asthma worse for some people. Always tell your doctor or pharmacist that you have asthma before they prescribe or suggest medication for you.

Medications which can commonly cause asthma to worsen in some people are *beta blocker tablets* taken for blood pressure and heart problems; *beta blocker eye drops* used in treating glaucoma; aspirin, ibuprofen and other medicines belonging to the non-steroidal anti inflammatories group (NSAIDs) which can be used for headaches and rheumatism (cream or tablets).

### **Is it still safe to have an operation with asthma?**

There is no reason why people with asthma should not have an operation. However, you should always tell the hospital consultant that you do have asthma and it is as well controlled as it can be. Your doctor may adjust your medication leading up to the operation to ensure your asthma control is optimal.

### **What if I have a problem using my inhaler?**

It is common to have difficulty using your inhaler. Your doctor, pharmacist, practice nurse or asthma educator can show you how to use it. The medicines come in a range of delivery devices, so it is usually possible to find one that suits you best. If you have arthritis or other difficulties, there are a number of aids that can help you overcome the problem.

### **What do I do if I have an asthma attack?**

Follow your Asthma Action Plan or if you do not have a plan begin Asthma First Aid. See the *Asthma First Aid* information sheet and consider putting it up on your fridge so it is easily accessible. If you are in any doubt about what to do or are at all concerned, **call the ambulance**.

For more information contact Asthma Foundation of QLD on 1800 645 130.