



Asthma at School for School Staff

Asthma affects up to one in four children and one in seven adolescents. It is important for teachers and staff to be aware of the symptoms, triggers and the management of asthma in the school environment. Asthma is the most common reason for school non-attendance and hospital admissions in school age children.

What is asthma?

People with asthma have sensitive airways in their lungs. When they are exposed to certain triggers, their airways narrow making it hard for them to breathe.

There are two main factors that cause the airways to become narrow:

1. The inside lining of the airways becomes swollen (**inflammation**).
2. The muscle around the airways tightens (**bronchoconstriction**).

What triggers asthma symptoms?

- Viral infections – e.g. colds and 'flu
- Exercise
- Inhaled allergens – e.g. pollens, moulds, animal hair, dust mites & cigarette smoke
- Changes in temperature and weather
- Chemicals and strong smells
- Some foods and food preservatives

What are the main symptoms of asthma?

1. coughing
2. shortness of breath/rapid breathing
3. tightness in the chest
4. wheezing (noisy breathing)

How can students with poorly controlled asthma be recognised?

- Frequent absenteeism from school due to asthma
- Regular/prolonged use of reliever medication for symptoms of asthma
- Tiredness/poor concentration
- Unable to exercise or play sport due to asthma

If you recognise a student who may have poorly controlled asthma, consider informing the parents so they can seek medical advice.

What action should I take as a member of school staff?

- Know your school's asthma management policy
- Know where the asthma first aid kits are located in the school
- Know how to implement emergency treatment in the event of an asthma attack

Can students with asthma exercise?

Exercise is important for health and development. Students with asthma should be encouraged to be active. With good management most students with asthma can exercise normally. Any sporting activity (except SCUBA diving) is suitable for students with asthma. However, swimming



helping people breathe better

is an activity less likely to trigger exercise-induced asthma (EIA). Endurance exercises (e.g. cross-country running) may trigger an asthma attack.

Students who have asthma symptoms during exercise (EIA) should:

- Take their blue reliever medication a few minutes before exercise or take medication as prescribed
- Start exercise with a warm-up program
- Finish exercise with a cool-down session

Exercise should only be avoided when the student is unwell or when symptoms of asthma are present.

What are the signs of an asthma attack?

The symptoms of asthma depend on whether the attack is *mild*, *moderate* or *severe*.

Mild	Moderate	Severe
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cough• Soft wheeze• Breathlessness or tight chest• Talks in sentences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Persistent cough• Unable to run around and exercise without wheezing or coughing• Talks in phrases	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Too breathless to talk or exercise• Distressed• Gasping for breath• May be pale, sweaty and have blue lips• Can only manage a word or two between breaths

What if it is the first attack of asthma?

Whether or not the student is known to have asthma, no harm is likely to result from giving “blue” reliever medication to someone without asthma.

If you think the student may be having an asthma attack, call an ambulance and give blue reliever medication as described in the *4 Step Asthma First Aid Plan*.

4 Step Asthma First Aid Plan

Step 1 Sit person upright and give reassurance.

Step 2 Without delay give 4 separate puffs of a reliever (*Airomir*, *Asmol*, *Epaq* or *Ventolin*). The medication is best given on puff at a time via a spacer device*. Ask the person to take 4 breaths from the spacer after each puff of medication.

Step 3 Wait 4 minutes.

Step 4 If there is little or no improvement, repeat steps 2 and 3.
If there is still little or no improvement, call an ambulance immediately (Dial 000).
Continuously repeat steps 2 and 3 while waiting for the ambulance.

**Just use the puffer on its own if you don't have a spacer.*

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