

Asthma - what is it and how to help



Asthma - what it is and how to help if someone is having an attack?

We all know someone who has asthma. However, few of us would actually know what to do if someone close by started to have a severe asthma attack and was struggling to breathe. Anyone can develop asthma but it is particularly common in Ireland with over 390,000 adults and children in Ireland having the condition. **One in 10 children in Ireland currently have asthma with 1 in 5 children experiencing an asthma attack in their lifetime.** Most alarming is that 1 person dies every 6 days as a result of their asthma (***Asthma Society Ireland 2019***). In this article we explain what asthma is, what may trigger asthma and how you can help someone who is experiencing an asthma attack.

What is asthma?

Asthma is a chronic and possibly life-threatening condition that affects the airways. The airways become over sensitive causing them to react to things that wouldn't usually be a problem, such as dust or cold air.

When the airways react to something, the muscles of the tube walls tighten up, making them narrow and leaving little room for air to flow in and out. The lining of the airways then becomes swollen and sticky mucus is emitted which bungs up the breathing passages.

This tightness can be relieved quickly with a **reliever inhaler** (usually blue). However, the mucus and swelling occur more slowly and need another treatment. This is usually a **preventative inhaler** (usually brown) which is taken daily to let the effect build up over time.



The majority of people with asthma are prescribed a daily preventer inhaler to protect against an attack and a reliever inhaler to use when symptoms occur.

Common Triggers

Symptoms can be triggered by a wide range of things which wouldn't typically cause a problem, these things are known as triggers. A trigger is anything that irritates the airways and causes the symptoms of asthma to emerge. Different people will have different triggers and may have several triggers that will affect their condition such as temperature changes or dust and air pollution.

Many asthmatics are familiar with their trigger points, although it is often not possible and very restrictive for someone to try to avoid certain environmental triggers entirely. Common triggers include:

- Air pollutants
- Certain drugs e.g., aspirin or beta blockers
- Emotions e.g., stress or anxiety
- Exercise and activity
- Weather changes
- Allergens such as pollen, dust mites and moulds
- Cigarette smoking

What are some of the symptoms of asthma?

Not everyone will experience the same symptoms, these can include:

- coughing
- wheezing
- shortness of breath
- tightness in the chest
- often people find it particularly difficult to breathe out and have an increase in sticky mucus and phlegm

Asthma Attacks

An attack can be a dangerous and fearful experience to be subjected to. They can occur out of the blue or when symptoms have been developing for a few hours or even days. The following are signs that someone's asthma is getting worse:

- Shortness of breath (unable to finish a sentence)
- Chest tightness
- Coughing and wheezing
- Too breathless to sleep, eat or walk
- Cyanosis (lips turning blue)
- Needing a reliever inhaler more than twice a week or more than usual

If someone is experiencing any of these symptoms you need to get medical advice, do not ignore them. If you believe someone is having an asthma attack you need to take immediate action by following this 5-step rule (***HSE Website***).

1. Take two puffs of reliever inhaler (usually blue) immediately
2. Sit upright and stay calm
3. Take slow steady breaths
4. If there is no immediate improvement take one puff of reliever inhaler every minute. It is recommended that people over 6 years can take up to 10 puffs in 10 minutes and children under 6 can take up to 6 puffs in 10 minutes.
5. Call 999 or 112 if symptoms do not improve after following steps 1 -4
OR if you are in worried

If an ambulance does not arrive within 10 minutes repeat Step 4.

Do not:

- Leave someone who is having an attack on their own.
- Put your arm around them as it will restrict breathing
- Lie them down
- Worry about giving too much reliever, during an asthma attack extra puffs are safe

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Hope you enjoyed this article on Asthma and how you can help someone facing this. You may also like to read or article on ***Panic Attacks.***