



Pharmacy Self Care Health Facts Column

By John Bell - 28 August 2008

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Keeping Asthma Under control

September in Australia signals the start of football finals. It's also the time when those amongst us who suffer from seasonal hayfever begin to feel the itch and irritation. As well, the first week in September is traditionally designated as National Asthma Awareness Week.

There is a strong relationship between asthma and allergies. So, with Spring in the air, those blooming plants at this time of year can cause more than the occasional snuffle and sneeze – real difficulty in breathing is often a consequence.

Australia has more people with asthma than just about anywhere else in the world. One in six children and one in ten adults live each day with this life-threatening disease. It affects over 2 million Australians. Everyone knows someone – a friend or family member – with asthma.

Asthma is a potentially very serious condition likely to cause at least discomfort, quite possibly severe disability and perhaps even death.

In Australia, the number of deaths recorded each year resulting from asthma has declined from nearly 1,000 some 20 years ago to around 300 today. However, asthma has a significant adverse impact on quality of life.

Most people who live with asthma think they are in control of their condition, but the reality is very different.

Managed appropriately, asthma should not be a major concern; but for most people with asthma, proper management is considered too onerous – or just not considered at all.

A variety of factors can trigger the inflammation which causes the symptoms of asthma – wheezing, shortness of breath, chest tightness and coughing, particularly at night or in the early morning. These trigger factors include allergies, viral infections and inhaled pollutants such as tobacco smoke, dust and dust mites. Cold air exposure and exercise can trigger asthma, as can reflux disease and certain medicines in people with super-sensitive airways.

Identification and avoidance of trigger factors goes a long way towards asthma control. But most people with asthma will need medicines as well.

What medicine is best and how often it should be used depends on whether the asthma is classified as intermittent, mild persistent, moderate persistent or severe persistent.

We don't yet have all the answers as to the exact underlying cause of asthma – that is, why some people have airways more naturally sensitive – nor do we have the perfect single treatment.

The Pharmaceutical Society in Australia (PSA) has recently revised the *Asthma* and *Asthma Medicines* fact cards. These cards provide the latest information on how asthma can be well controlled so that people with asthma can live a normal and active life, free of symptoms.

These cards are available from all pharmacies in Australia that provide the PSA Self Care health information. Phone 1300 369 772 for the nearest location or alternatively log onto www.psa.org.au and use the Self Care pharmacy locator.

To help assess the severity of your asthma and assist your doctor in achieving the best possible control check your "asthma score" at www.asthmaaustralia.org. And while you're surfing the web, you can access asthma advice from Asthma Australia and the State Asthma Foundations at www.asthmaaustralia.org

With good asthma management strategies we should all breathe a little more easily.