

Controlling the wheeze and sneeze disease

The first Tuesday of May each year has been designated as World Asthma Day; simply to increase awareness of the prevention and treatment strategies of this all-too-common chronic condition.

This year, just about every health related issue has been overshadowed by the threat of swine flu.

Certainly the risk of contracting flu this winter, in fact any winter, is very real. And this is despite the attempts of our public health authorities to prevent the entry to Australia of the offending virus – the so-called H1N1 virus first identified in Mexico and then subsequently in other countries of the Americas.

In Australia, as elsewhere, seasonal flu generally affects older people to a greater degree. With the swine flu, younger people seem to be more likely to be affected, because they have had less time to develop a residual immunity. It is probable that, at best, several hundred Australians will be affected; and some thousands more will get the anticipated seasonal flu.

Nevertheless it should be remembered that more than 2 million Australians have asthma. For better or worse, they live with asthma every day.

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.

Most people with asthma also have allergic rhinitis – that is: hay fever. And many people who have hay fever are also likely to develop asthma. That's why it's now commonly called the wheeze and sneeze disease. Effective control requires treatment of both the lungs and the nose.

The theme for World Asthma Day 2009 is “you can control your asthma”.

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

The Pharmaceutical Society in Australia (PSA) has recently revised its *Asthma* and *Asthma Medicines* fact cards. The 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 go to www.psa.org.au and use the Pharmacy Self Care pharmacy locator.

With good asthma management strategies we should all breathe a little more easily and be better placed to avoid the flu, as well.