



**Asthma**  
Australia

# Thunderstorm Asthma

Protect yourself this pollen season  
Managing asthma and allergies matters



Supported by the Victorian Government

Contact your local Asthma Foundation  
**1800 ASTHMA Helpline** (1800 278 462)  
[asthmaaustralia.org.au](http://asthmaaustralia.org.au)



# What is thunderstorm asthma?

Epidemic thunderstorm asthma is the phenomenon where a large number of people develop asthma symptoms over a short period of time. It is thought to be triggered by an uncommon combination of high pollen levels and a certain type of thunderstorm.

This occurs when pollen grains from grasses get swept up in the wind and carried for long distances. Just before the storm, some burst open and release tiny particles that are concentrated in the wind, and blown down to ground, where people can breathe them in. They are small enough to go deep into the lungs and can trigger asthma symptoms such as:

- breathlessness
- wheezing
- coughing; or
- a tight feeling in the chest.

These thunderstorm asthma events don't occur every year but when they do, they can happen during the grass pollen season in south-east Australia. The grass pollen season varies across Australia however in south-east Australia it is typically from October through December.

## Who is at risk of thunderstorm asthma?

Those at increased risk of epidemic thunderstorm asthma include:

- People with asthma
- People with a past history of asthma
- Those with undiagnosed asthma
- People with seasonal hay fever who have not ever had asthma

**Having both asthma and hay fever and poor control of asthma increases the risk further.**



## **This means taking the following actions:**

### **If you think you might have symptoms of asthma or hay fever or if you experience wheezing or coughing with your hay fever**

See your doctor and get these symptoms checked. They will give you a proper diagnosis, help you get an asthma or hay fever action plan in place and make sure you've got the right medication.

### **If you know you have asthma or hay fever**

If you currently have asthma, you should have regular reviews with your doctor about your asthma to ensure that you have the right medication and that you have good control of your asthma. It is also important that you have an asthma action plan and that you see your doctor to ensure that it includes advice for epidemic thunderstorm asthma. Always carry your reliever medication with you - this is your emergency asthma first aid medication.

If you experience seasonal hay fever, see your doctor or pharmacist about your hay fever care and how you should manage the risk of epidemic thunderstorm asthma, including the need for having reliever medication appropriately available during the pollen season.

### **Know the Asthma First Aid steps**

It's important for everyone to know the symptoms of asthma and what to do if someone is having an asthma attack.

### **Never ignore asthma symptoms like breathlessness, wheezing and tightness in the chest**

Start Asthma First Aid immediately and call Triple Zero (000) for help if symptoms do not get any better or if they start to get worse.

### **Sign up for alerts about high pollen days in your state and territory**

It's best to avoid being outside during thunderstorms during the grass pollen season – especially in the wind gusts that come before the storm. Stay inside and close your doors and windows.



# Being prepared

## Thunderstorm asthma checklist

Manage your asthma and hay fever well before the pollen season and protect yourself and your family from thunderstorm asthma.

What can you do to ensure you and your family are ready for pollen season?

**Symptoms**

If you wheeze or cough during pollen season, you may have asthma without knowing it - don't ignore these symptoms.

**Have an asthma or hay fever check up with your doctor**

See your doctor to discuss asthma and/or hay fever symptoms, even if you have been symptom free for a long time, get a proper diagnosis and ensure you have the right treatment.

**Get an updated written action plan from your doctor**

Have a plan for what medications you need to take and when, this could be for your asthma and/or hay fever.

**Medications**

Know and use your medications properly. Always carry your reliever medication with you - this is your emergency asthma first aid medication. Take your prescribed asthma preventer and hay fever treatment.

**Be aware of thunderstorm forecasts**

– particularly on HIGH or EXTREME pollen count days

It's best to avoid being outside during thunderstorms during the grass pollen season – especially in the wind gusts that come before the storm. Stay inside and close your doors and windows.

**Know the Asthma First Aid steps**

- Know how to recognise asthma symptoms and
- Know how to carry out Asthma First Aid

For more information about thunderstorm asthma and how you can be prepared, visit: [www.asthmaaustralia.org.au](http://www.asthmaaustralia.org.au)

# In preparation for the pollen season

## Visit your usual doctor prior to the pollen season

Manage your asthma and hay fever well before the pollen season and protect yourself and your family from thunderstorm asthma.

## Learn more about thunderstorm asthma

Visit Better Health Channel

[www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)

## Learn more about asthma

Contact your local Asthma Foundation

**1800 ASTHMA Helpline** (1800 278 462)

[asthmaaustralia.org.au](http://asthmaaustralia.org.au)

## Learn Asthma First Aid

Visit [asthmaaustralia.org.au](http://asthmaaustralia.org.au)

or Asthma Australia's **YouTube** channel.

## Take action if you are experiencing asthma symptoms or having trouble breathing

**In an emergency, always dial Triple Zero (000)**

**Follow your written Asthma Action Plan or commence Asthma First Aid:**

- If you are experiencing a severe or life-threatening asthma attack, call an ambulance - Dial Triple Zero (000) and then start asthma first aid.
- If you are experiencing a mild to moderate asthma attack, start asthma first aid.

No matter where you are, a pharmacy or doctor's surgery can assist you – don't hesitate to seek help. Blue/grey reliever puffers are available over the counter from any pharmacy and they can assist with Asthma First Aid.

## 13SICK National Home Doctor Service

Members can request after-hours home doctor visits (bulk billed). This service is not for emergencies. **13SICK** (13 74 25)

[www.homedoctor.com.au](http://www.homedoctor.com.au)

## Nurse-On-Call (for Victorian residents)

This is a phone service that provides immediate, expert health advice from a registered nurse, 24 hours a day, seven days a week 1300 60 60 24

**If you think your situation is an emergency, you should always call Triple Zero (000) or go to an emergency department at a hospital.**

# Helping someone experiencing asthma symptoms

An asthma flare-up can happen to anyone with asthma, at any time. In an event like thunderstorm asthma, even someone not known to have asthma might have these symptoms, and they might appear very quickly.

Asthma flare-ups can get worse very quickly (in seconds to minutes) – some people call this an asthma attack.

Asthma flare-ups can also develop more slowly (over hours to days or even weeks).

## Asthma First Aid can save someone's life.

Do not wait until asthma is severe to start first aid. Learn asthma first aid and be prepared to commence the Asthma First Aid steps, regardless of whether a person is known to have asthma or not.

Signs of an asthma flare-up can include **any** of the following:

### Mild/ Moderate

- Minor difficulty breathing
- Able to talk in full sentences
- Able to walk/move around
- May have cough or wheeze



**Ask the person if they need help.**

**If so, assist the person with Asthma First Aid.**

### Severe

- Obvious difficulty breathing
- Cannot speak a full sentence in one breath
- Tugging in of the skin between ribs or at base of neck
- May have cough or wheeze
- Reliever medication not lasting as long as usual

**Call Ambulance – Dial Triple Zero (000)**

**Commence Asthma First Aid.**

### Life threatening

- Gasping for breath
- Unable to speak or 1-2 words per breath
- Confused or exhausted
- Turning blue
- Collapsing
- May no longer have wheeze or cough
- Not responding to reliever medication

**Call Ambulance – Dial Triple Zero (000)**

**Commence Asthma First Aid.**

# Asthma First Aid

## 1 Sit the person upright

- Be calm and reassuring
- Do not leave them alone



## 2 Give 4 separate puffs of blue/grey reliever puffer

- Shake puffer
- Put 1 puff into spacer
- Take 4 breaths from spacer

Repeat until 4 puffs have been taken

**Remember: Shake, 1 puff, 4 breaths**

OR give 2 separate doses of a Bricanyl inhaler (age 6 & over) or a Symbicort inhaler (over 12)



## 3 Wait 4 minutes

- If there is no improvement, give 4 more separate puffs of blue/grey reliever as above

OR give 1 more dose of Bricanyl or Symbicort inhaler



## 4 If there is still no improvement call emergency assistance Dial Triple Zero

- Say 'ambulance' and that someone is having an asthma attack
- Keep giving 4 separate puffs every 4 minutes until emergency assistance arrives

OR give 1 dose of a Bricanyl or Symbicort every 4 minutes - up to 3 more doses of Symbicort



### Call emergency assistance immediately - Dial Triple Zero (000)

- If the person is not breathing
- If the person's asthma suddenly becomes worse or is not improving
- If the person is having an asthma attack and a reliever is not available
- If you are not sure if it's asthma
- If the person is known to have Anaphylaxis - follow their Anaphylaxis Action Plan, then give Asthma First Aid

**Blue/grey reliever medication is unlikely to harm, even if the person does not have asthma**



## Asthma Australia

Contact your local Asthma Foundation  
**1800 ASTHMA Helpline** (1800 278 462)  
[asthmaaustralia.org.au](http://asthmaaustralia.org.au)

© Asthma Australia 2016 Supported by the Australian Government



Translating and  
Interpreting Service  
131 450



# Asthma Australia

This brochure has been developed for the community by Asthma Australia with support from the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services.

## It provides information about:

- What is thunderstorm asthma?
- How to be prepared
- How you can help someone with asthma?

## Other Asthma Australia brochures:

- Asthma basic facts
- Asthma medications & devices - a guide
- Seniors
- Live well checklist
- Things to ask & tell your doctor
- Things to ask and tell your Pharmacist

## Contact your local Asthma Foundation

**1800 ASTHMA Helpline** (1800 278 462)  
[asthmaaustralia.org.au](http://asthmaaustralia.org.au)



Translating and  
Interpreting Service  
**131 450**

All Asthma Australia information is endorsed by our Medical and Scientific Advisory Committee and is consistent with the Australian Asthma Handbook. Asthma Australia information does not replace professional medical advice. People should ask their doctor any questions about diagnosis and treatment.

©Asthma Australia 2017. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 Australia License.

