

# World Asthma Day

## *The Health Column*

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World Asthma Day this year is on 6 May and this is an annual event organised by the Global Initiative for Asthma (GINA) to improve asthma awareness and care around the world.

Asthma is a common chronic inflammatory disease of the airways characterised by variable and recurring symptoms, reversible airflow obstruction, and bronchospasm. Symptoms include wheezing, coughing, chest tightness, and shortness of breath.

Asthma is caused by environmental and genetic factors and these factors influence how severe asthma is and how well it responds to medication. The interaction is complex and not fully understood.

Its diagnosis is usually made based on the pattern of symptoms and/or response to therapy over time.

The prevalence of asthma has increased significantly since the 1970s and at present it is estimated that more than 300 million people are affected worldwide with more than 250,000 deaths globally every year. Despite this, with proper control of asthma, prognosis is generally good.

Asthma is a disease of the airways. When you have asthma symptoms, the muscles in the airways tighten and the lining of the airways swell and produce sticky mucus.

These changes cause the airways to become narrow, so that there is less space for the air to flow into and out of your lungs, resulting in symptoms which can include coughing, tight feeling in the chest, wheezing – whistling noise when breathing, shortness of breath, and struggling to breathe.

These symptoms are often worse at night, in the early morning or during exercise.

In addition, children may display other symptoms such as:

- Not eating or drinking as much
- Crying
- Have tummy ache and vomiting
- Becoming tired quickly
- Getting more puffed out than usual when running and playing



*Photo by Luke Low*

Recognising and avoiding triggers is important and research has identified a range of triggers, among which the most common are:

- Allergy triggers, e.g. house dust mites, pollens, pets and moulds
- Cigarette smoke

- Viral infections, e.g. colds and flu
- Weather, e.g. cold air, change in temperature, thunderstorms
- Work-related triggers, e.g. wood dust, chemicals, metal salts
- Some medicines

Asthma that is triggered by exercise may be helped by medication and/or warm up exercises. The good news is that asthma is a manageable health condition. So although at present there is no cure, with good management, people with asthma can lead normal, active lives.

Depending on how severe your asthma is, your doctor may prescribe you one or more types of asthma medicine:

- A reliever medicine relaxes the airway muscles and makes it easier to breathe when you have asthma symptoms. If you find you are using your reliever more often than 2 times a week, you should see your doctor.
- A preventer medicine helps to reduce the inflammation in your airways. It should be taken every day, even when you have no symptoms.
- A combination of both a preventer and a long acting reliever medicine called a symptom controller.

These medicines can be obtained from your pharmacist who can also provide other advice on how to manage your asthma, especially on the correct use of your inhaler, a vital element in managing the condition.

Your local community pharmacy is your health destination and your Self Care pharmacist can give you more information about asthma and has fact cards on the topics of *Asthma* and *Asthma medicines*. For the nearest location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772 or check the website [www.psa.org.au](http://www.psa.org.au) and click on Self Care Pharmacy Finder.

More research is needed and one event this World Asthma Day is PJ Day when people are encouraged to stay in their pyjamas for the day – all in a good cause. Asthma Australia ([www.asthmaaustralia.org.au/pjday](http://www.asthmaaustralia.org.au/pjday)) has all the details.