



## Become an asthma control freak

*Self Care principal adviser and spokesperson John Bell*

The first week in September each year is traditionally designated as National Asthma Awareness Week - an opportunity to focus our attention on a condition which directly affects more than two million Australians. This year one of the key messages to come from National Asthma Awareness Week is the critical importance of good control.

The prevalence of asthma in Australia is greater than just about anywhere else in the world. Everyone knows someone – a friend or family member – with asthma.

And asthma is a potentially very serious condition likely to cause at least discomfort, quite possibly severe disability and perhaps even death. So, learning “asthma first aid” is a simple skill that could save someone’s life. Whilst older people are most affected by the condition, those most likely to go to a hospital emergency department are children up to 14 years of age.

In Australia, the number of deaths from asthma each year declined from about 1,000 some 20 years ago to less than 300 in 2005, but in the past few years it has been increasing again to more than 400.

A variety of factors can trigger the inflammation which causes the typical 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. Even laughing (said to be the best medicine!!), especially in children, has been shown to trigger asthma.



Photo by Dave Kennard

It helps to know what triggers your asthma; but if asthma is well controlled, exposure to trigger factors should not be a problem. The exception is cigarette smoke which directly harms the airways and makes asthma worse. So, exposure to cigarette smoke should be avoided by anyone with asthma.

Usually people with asthma will need both preventer and reliever medicines. And what medicine is best and how often it should be used depends on the frequency and severity of the asthma.

Most people who live with asthma think they are in control of their condition, but the reality is very different. In fact, if you need to use your reliever medicine three or more times a week, your asthma is definitely not properly controlled

Managed appropriately, asthma should not be a major concern. Unfortunately, most people with asthma consider proper management is too onerous – or it's just not considered at all.

And sadly, very few people seem to be aware of asthma first aid. These procedures are essential to know, not only for everyone with asthma, but also if you have someone with asthma in your family or you’re caring for someone with asthma. It’s also especially important for teachers to know about asthma first aid. The State Asthma Foundations have available Asthma Emergency Kits which include basic equipment and instructions for use to assist someone having an asthma attack; and the Foundations can provide education and training on the use of the kits. For more details check out the website [www.asthmaaustralia.org.au](http://www.asthmaaustralia.org.au)

As well, the Pharmaceutical Society in Australia (PSA) has recently revised the two fact cards: *Asthma* and *Asthma Medicines*. 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.

The 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](http://www.psa.org.au) and click on “Self Care” then “Find a Self Care Pharmacy”.

Being aware of good asthma management strategies should make us all breathe a little more easily.