



WHAT IS ASTHMA?

A SHORTNESS of breath, a whistling, squeaky sound when inhaling, the sensation of something squeezing or sitting on your chest or coughing that makes it hard to sleep. These are some of the symptoms an asthma sufferer experiences when having an asthma attack. Asthma is a condition that affects the airways – the tubes that carry air in and out of the lungs – making them swollen and sensitive. The muscles tighten and the airway narrows causing less air to flow into the lungs. A sticky, thick liquid called mucus can form further

narrowing the airways. All this makes it very hard to breathe. Asthma symptoms may be mild, moderate or severe. They may go away on their own or after treatment with medicine. Sometimes the symptoms continue and get more intense, requiring emergency care.

Certain triggers such as pollen, smoke or even exercise can cause an attack. It is not known for sure why some people get asthma. It tends to run in families and is related to eczema and hay fever. But most people who have asthma are able to manage the condition.

SYMPTOMS

ASTHMA may be classed as either 'intermittent' – don't have symptoms all the time and are usually short, isolated episodes or 'persistent' – more frequent symptoms and attacks that are rated mild, moderate or severe. It is important that you know how to recognise an asthma attack and know what to do to help someone who is experiencing the symptoms.

Mild Asthma Attack

- Cough, wheeze
- Some shortness of breath
- Still able to speak in full sentences

between breaths

Moderate Attack

- Continual cough, moderate to loud wheeze
- Obvious difficulty breathing
- Only able to speak in short phrases between breaths

Severe Asthma Attack

- Severe difficulties breathing
- Speak no more than a few words at a time
- Wheeze is often quiet
- Sucking in of the throat and rib muscles

TREATMENT

EVEN though asthma can have a major impact on the quality of life for those who suffer from it, with the right medicine, treatment and preventative plan asthma can be managed. An asthma attack may occur rapidly – in the space of a few minutes – or may take hours or even

days to happen. There is a standard first aid procedure that is safe to follow for anyone suffering an asthma attack. The quicker the Asthma First Aid procedure is started the better the outcome.

HEALTH HUB

Breathe Easy

ASTHMA is a breathing disease that affects Australians young and old. More than two million Australians suffer from asthma and each year it claims about 400 lives. It can start at any age but is more common in children. People with asthma can still live life to the max. With knowledge, skills and the right medication, asthma sufferers can do just about anything. It's all about taking control and learning to breathe easy.

ASTHMA FIRST AID PROCEDURE

- **Step 1** Sit the person upright, be calm and reassuring. Do not leave the person alone.
- **Step 2** Give four separate puffs of a blue reliever i.e. one puff, then 4 breaths; another puff, then 4 breaths; another puff, then 4 breaths; another puff, then 4 breaths.
- **Step 3** Wait four minutes to see the effect of the reliever treatment.
- **Step 4** If there is little or no improvement, repeat steps 2 and 3. If there is still no improvement call an ambulance immediately (Dial 000). Continue to repeat steps 2 and 3 while waiting for the ambulance.



A STORY

"It feels like there's an elephant sitting on my chest."

That's how Beau Van Dijk once described a severe asthma attack.

It started when Beau was an infant with croup and bronchitis, but the doctors quickly saw that his difficulty breathing was related to a more permanent condition – asthma.

Beau's asthma was diagnosed as persistent, which means symptoms like chest tightness, wheezing and sleep disturbance are common and physical activities can trigger an attack. It has been a struggle for his doctors and parents to control it as Beau has no specific triggers and his attacks can be so sudden and terrifying in intensity that he ends up in hospital.

Asthma has had a huge impact on Beau's young life.

He often missed school, was not as energetic as his brothers and sisters and was afraid of going outside if smog or bushfire haze lingered in the air – in case he had an asthma attack. Playing sports was also out of the question.

As his lung capacity is quite fragile, Beau needs to visit the hospital every month for tests. Beau, 12, is impacted by his asthma every day. But such is Beau's determination to one day see a cure for asthma that he has become the Asthma Foundation's youngest asthma ambassador. Through a collection he ran in the local shops, Beau sent the Asthma Foundation a cheque to support asthma research.

"I want everyone to be able to breathe." (Extract from the Australian Asthma Foundation – Our Ambassadors, www.asthmafoundation.org.au)

NEXT WEEK: HEROES