**THUNDERSTORM ASTHMA – WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW**

It is important to be thunderstorm asthma aware and prepared for the upcoming thunderstorm season, it could save your life or your loved one.

According to the Department of Health and Human Services, there is a greater risk of an epidemic thunderstorm asthma event occurring this year due to a wet spring encouraging grass growth. This is caused by the La’Nina effect, which usually means above-average winter–spring rainfall for Australia.

To ensure all members of the community are best prepared this thunderstorm season, Asthma Australia has information to help if an epidemic thunderstorm asthma warning is issued.

**WHAT IS THUNDERSTORM ASTHMA?**

Thunderstorm asthma is asthma which is triggered by thunderstorms particularly during high pollen periods in spring. It caused 10 deaths and thousands of people to present to hospitals and call ambulances with breathing difficulties across Melbourne in 2016. It can be a recurring event but doesn't happen every year.

Everyone with hay fever or asthma living in South Eastern Australia, particularly Victoria and south west NSW are potentially at risk. People from Indian, Sri Lankan and South East Asian ethnicities, and people with diagnosed asthma and hay fever are at highest risk.

In 2016, people from these ethnicities accounted for six out of the ten deaths and 40% of the 3,365 people who presented to hospitals with respiratory-related presentations. It is vital that culturally and linguistically diverse communities are prepared for the coming thunderstorm season.

Asthma Australia warns that anyone who:

* Sneezes
* Gets a running or blocked nose
* Itchy, red or watery eyes
* Has any difficulty breathing
* Coughs frequently

could have seasonal allergies or asthma and may be at risk of thunderstorm asthma.

Thunderstorm asthma doesn't happen every year but when it does it's during September to January, with the highest risk being October to the end of December. These are the months when rye grass pollen is highest and thunderstorms are more likely. Many people new to Australia may not know they have allergies or asthma triggered by Australian grasses or thunderstorm asthma.

**To prepare for a thunderstorm asthma event, people living in South Eastern Australia, particularly in Victoria and South Western New South Wales, are advised to:**

* **Check your Asthma Control Score (link); if under 20 see your doctor urgently**
* Find out now if you’re at risk. Visit your doctor in case you have any of the symptoms mentioned above
* Get tested at your doctors for pollen allergies and discuss asthma
* Control asthma and hay fever with daily preventative treatment provided by your doctor
* Make sure you access up to date information:
  + Download the [Melbourne Pollen App](https://www.melbournepollen.com.au/mobile-app/) to get Thunderstorm Asthma Warnings in Victoria
  + Sign up to the Riverina district thunderstorm asthma [email and SMS alert system](https://science.csu.edu.au/asthma)
  + Download the [Sydney Pollen App](https://www.sydneypollen.com.au/) to get Thunderstorm asthma warnings in NSW
  + Download the [AirRater App](https://airrater.org/) for air quality, pollen levels and thunderstorms asthma warnings in ACT and Tasmania
* Always carry an in-date asthma reliver with you, or know how to access one if your loved one has asthma
* Understand worsening asthma symptoms, how to do asthma first aid and when to call an ambulance (Triple Zero 000)

**If a thunderstorm asthma warning is issued, do not go outside.**

* Stay inside with windows and doors closed to completely avoid the pollens, if you have an air conditioner turn it on to recirculate
* Have your asthma reliever (and spacer if a puffer device) on hand and ensure you have help with you or can access help on the phone
* Follow your written Asthma Action Plan
* If you have asthma symptoms start Asthma First Aid, if symptoms worsen call Triple Zero (000) immediately
* If you need to call an ambulance and you receive a message informing you of a delay, go directly to your nearest medical centre or hospital for assistance. Do not wait.
* Try to avoid contact with outside air if travelling to a medical centre or hospital

**WHAT IS ASTHMA?**

Asthma is a long-term lung condition of the airways (the passage that transports air into our lungs).  Currently there is no cure, but asthma can be well managed.

People experiencing asthma have sensitive airways. These airways become inflamed (red and swollen) when they are exposed to [triggers](https://asthma.org.au/about-asthma/triggers/). Airways narrow and can cause significant, persistent and troublesome symptoms. Narrowing and inflammation can cause breathing difficulties, and if left untreated can lead to a medical emergency.

A flare-up can come on slowly over hours, days or even weeks, or quickly over minutes.

A doctor should always diagnose asthma. Diagnosis usually involves providing your doctor with information about your health and overall circumstances – include recent illnesses, medications, smoking, exercise, weight changes or allergies and recent breathing symptoms or changes in the way you breathe. Doctor may also ask you to undertake a lung function test.

**Asthma symptoms include:**

* Being short of breath; You may start to feel anxious and easily out of breath doing normal activity
* wheezing;
* coughing;
* a tight feeling in the chest (or a sore tummy in young children)

**If you are gasping for breath, can't talk in a full sentence, reliever medication is not lasting or helping or if a loved one is drowsy/confused or has blue lips these are SEVERE or LIFE THREATENING symptoms; call Triple Zero (000) immediately and commence asthma first aid.**

**THUNDERSTORM ASTHMA FIRST AID**

**Instructions**

If you are not diagnosed with asthma but start to experience symptoms like shortness of breath, tightness in the chest, persistent coughing or wheezing, and you have no immediate access to a reliever puffer, don’t wait - seek urgent medical care or in the event of an emergency call Triple Zero (000).

**Asthma First Aid for blue/grey reliever medication**

1. Sit the person upright
2. Give 4 separate puffs of a blue/grey reliever puffer, through a spacer if applicable
3. Wait 4 minutes
4. Repeat
5. If no improvement call Triple Zero (000)
6. Continue to give 4 separate puffs of a blue/grey reliever puffer every 4 minutes until the ambulance arrives
7. **If your reliever is not a blue/grey puffer style, see Asthma Australia’s Asthma First Aid chart here** [***https://asthma.org.au/what-we-do/how-we-can-help/first-aid/***](https://asthma.org.au/what-we-do/how-we-can-help/first-aid/)

**Important Contacts**

* 1800 ASTHMA (1800 278 462) for asthma information and support
* National Home Doctor Service 13 SICK (13 74 25) for after-hours home doctor visits (bulked billed)
* To speak to a registered nurse, call Health Direct on 1800 022 222\*(this is an Australian wide 24-hour triage)
* If you are unable to access a doctor, call 13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) available 24hrs 7 days. https://www.health.qld.gov.au/13health (available in QLD only)
* In an emergency, always call Triple Zero (000)

**QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

**How does TSA happen?**

* It is triggered by an uncommon combination of high pollen levels and a certain type of thunderstorm. These events don’t occur every year but when they do, they can happen during the grass pollen season in south-east Australia, September to January, but the risk is highest from October to the end of December.
* Pollens get swept into the storm, burst open and release tiny particles that are concentrated in the wind just before the thunderstorm hits.
* These tiny particles enter deep into the airways and can trigger asthma symptoms.
* In 2016, there was an unusual drop in temperature before strong winds swept tiny pollen particles across the western suburbs of Melbourne.

**What do you do if there's a Thunderstorm asthma event like in 2016? Do you call an ambulance?**

* If you have breathing difficulty continue to follow your asthma first aid steps and call an ambulance if you don’t improve or get worse, on Triple Zero (000).
* The coroner's report from 2017 encouraged people to call an ambulance, but not to wait too long if there is a delay. Ambulance Victoria now have a recorded message if there is high demand on ambulances and if there will be a delay.
* If a delay, don’t wait - seek immediate medical support from your local medical centre or hospital immediately.

**How do you know if you are experiencing asthma symptoms? Particularly the first time.**

* Epidemic thunderstorm asthma is the phenomenon where a large number of people develop asthma symptoms over a short period of time, such as:
  + Breathlessness
  + Wheezing
  + Coughing; or
  + A tight feeling in the chest, or a sore tummy in young children
* It may feel unusual or new to you, but don't ignore the symptoms. Seek medical treatment immediately.

**Why are Indian and Asian population more at risk?**

* This population group once living in Australia, showed a trend toward having allergies, that were not present in their home country.
* They may be undiagnosed or have bad allergies and asthma that is difficult to manage.
* Language barriers may exist.

**Where can I go if I have questions about asthma and allergies**

* Call your doctor or preferred health professional.
* Speak with an Asthma Australia, Asthma Educator at [1800 ASTHMA](https://asthma.org.au/what-we-do/how-we-can-help/1800-asthma/) (1800 278 462) Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm (across both AEST and AEDT). If English is not your first language, simply call the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS National) on 131 450 and ask them to telephone Asthma Australia on 1800 278 462
* Contact Health direct on 1800 022 222 for 24 hour health advice from a registered nurse