

BREATHE BETTER IN COLD WEATHER



MANY PEOPLE EXPERIENCE AN INCREASE IN ASTHMA SYMPTOMS AND FIND THEIR ASTHMA HARDER TO CONTROL WHEN THE AIR TURNS COLD.

Follow these steps to breathe better this winter.

Visit your doctor for an asthma review

Visit your doctor every 6 – 12 months for an [asthma review](#).
With your doctor:

- Assess your current level of asthma control
- Make sure you are on the right medicines to manage your asthma (e.g. a preventer)
- Check your inhaler technique
- Ensure your written Asthma Action Plan is up to date
- Ask any questions

Get a written Asthma Action Plan

An Asthma Action Plan is something developed with a doctor to help provide clear instructions on what to do when experiencing asthma symptoms or during an asthma flare-up and should include instructions about managing asthma alongside identified triggers.

With your doctor, develop or update your written [Asthma Action Plan](#).

Follow a written Asthma Action Plan for:

- Better controlled asthma
- Fewer asthma flare-ups
- Fewer days off work or school
- Reduced reliever medication use
- Fewer hospital visits

Take the Asthma Control Test

If you have experienced any of the following in the last four weeks, it indicates your asthma may not be under control:

- Daytime asthma symptoms more than two days per week
- Need for reliever medication more than two days per week
- Any limitation of activities due to asthma symptoms
- Any asthma symptoms during the night or on waking

Take the [Asthma Control Test](#) to get your Asthma Score and determine your level of asthma control.

Preventer - every day, even when well

[Preventers](#) work to reduce the inflammation in the airways. Regular use of your preventer makes the airways less sensitive, which reduces the frequency and severity of asthma symptoms (reducing the need for your reliever medication) and the risk of future flare-ups. Daily use of a preventer is key to keeping well.

Check your device technique

Research shows up to 90% of people use their inhalers incorrectly, which means not as much of the dose of medicine used is getting into the lungs where it's needed. Ask your doctor or pharmacist to check your [device technique](#) and that you are taking your inhaler medication correctly.

Learn the steps of Asthma First Aid

The Asthma First Aid app is your go-to tool for an asthma emergency. It covers both first aid in the event of an asthma emergency plus the ability to review each of the four first aid steps. Download the [Asthma First Aid app](#) from the App Store or Google Play.

Colds, flu and viruses – get the flu and COVID vaccinations

The flu and other viral infections are the most common trigger for asthma flare-ups (attacks). [Colds and flu](#) can be more serious for people with asthma, even if your asthma is mild or your symptoms are well-controlled by medication.

The best way to protect yourself from the flu and spreading it to others is annual flu vaccination. The flu virus is always changing, so it is important to have the flu vaccine every year. This will ensure you and your family are protected against the most recent flu virus strains that may be around. It is best to be vaccinated from mid-April so your body has time to protect itself and you are ready for the peak flu period, from June to September. Everyone with asthma including all family members should be vaccinated against the flu, especially people with severe asthma.

This winter, it's also important for people with asthma to get the [COVID vaccine](#) in addition to the annual flu vaccine. However, the Department of Health recommends separating the vaccines by at least two weeks. For more information on these vaccinations, speak with your doctor.

Good winter hygiene

Stopping the spread of flu is as easy as making sure you're following three simple steps:

- 1 Cough or sneeze into your elbow
- 2 Wash your hands thoroughly and
- 3 If you're really unwell, stay home

Exercise

We know that an impact of physical distancing and staying inside during the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increase in sedentary lifestyles. We also understand that people with asthma are often hesitant to exercise outdoors during winter due to cold air triggers and the circulation of viruses.

However, [exercise](#) is an important part of your overall asthma management. Asthma shouldn't stop you from being physically active, in fact people with asthma who participate in exercise training report feeling better.

- Ask your doctor for help establishing an exercise plan for this winter
- Consider if cold, dry air or exercise trigger your asthma and discuss how to manage these triggers with your doctor
- Avoid early morning and evening exercise outdoors when the air is coldest
- Try alternative indoor exercise options such as yoga, live stream exercise classes, using treadmills and stationary bikes
- Always warm up slowly before starting rigorous exercise and cool down after completing it

Triggers

Identifying and minimising exposure to confirmed triggers may help improve asthma control. Other than changes in temperature and colds and flu, [winter triggers](#) may also include dust mites, pollens and mould.

Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about the many benefits of reducing and washing away allergens, irritants and viruses breathed into the nose when a preservative-free saline nasal spray or sinus irrigation is used.

Vitamin D

A rich source of [Vitamin D](#) comes from the sun, and there is growing interest and research into the potential role of Vitamin D in asthma management. Plus, being outdoors is also great for your immune system and overall health and wellbeing.

With shorter and cooler days during winter, and more time spent indoors, you may have less exposure to the sun and therefore Vitamin D production.

- Try to spend some time outdoors each day. Perhaps knock off work 30 minutes early for a walk or if you are at home, take time to enjoy your outdoor space and bask in the sunshine. Just remember to be SunSmart when you are outside and limit direct sun exposure on skin to 15 – 20 minutes per day.
- While limited research suggests Vitamin D may be helpful, there isn't enough evidence as yet to suggest recommending Vitamin D supplementation as part of general asthma management. Speak to your doctor if you are concerned about your Vitamin D levels.

Indoor Air Quality

Some [heating systems](#) can be a trigger for people with asthma. Consider what triggers your asthma and how you can reduce your exposure:

- Un-flued gas heating can release chemicals such as nitrogen dioxide which can be a trigger for asthma
- Fan-forced ducted heating can collect dust, and if not cleaned will circulate dust around the home. Make sure you have your ducted heating cleaned before using it after a period of time.
- Wood fire heaters produce high levels of smoke and particulate matter (PM2.5) which can be a trigger for asthma. If your wood fire heater triggers your asthma, and there is not an alternative heating method, consider the following ways to reduce the impact of wood heater smoke:
 - Have your flue professionally checked and cleaned before winter
 - Burn only dry, unseasoned, untreated wood
 - Get a hot fire started, using plenty of paper and small kindling
 - Don't overload your wood heater with too much wood
 - Never leave your fire to smoulder overnight, this starves the fire of oxygen, producing smoke and pollution

Mental Health

As is the case with other chronic conditions, research shows, people with asthma are more likely to have depression or anxiety than people without asthma. Having [emotional triggers](#) such as depression or anxiety can also make it harder to manage your asthma.

We know winter can be challenging for people with asthma and that it is another burden to manage. If you notice you are feeling down, anxious or aren't enjoying normal activities as much as usual, make sure you speak to your doctor or call Beyond Blue on 1300 224 636.

For more information on how to breathe better with asthma this winter, call **1800 ASTHMA (1800 278 462)** and speak with an Asthma Educator or visit asthma.org.au/winter-asthma



ENT, Bird Healthcare, AirPhysio and Sanofi are campaign partners of Asthma Australia and have not been involved in the development of this resource.

