



**ASTHMA
AUSTRALIA**

**ASTHMA AUSTRALIA'S
COVID-19 SURVEYS**

2020-2021

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Asthma Australia has monitored consumer sentiments through our telephone helpline and digital channels as well as regular surveys. This report details the key findings from each of Asthma Australia's COVID-19 surveys.

The below table describes each survey, date of data collection, number of respondents and the purpose.

Table 1: Asthma Australia COVID-19 Surveys

Survey	Date	Responses	Purpose		
COVID-19 and Asthma Survey	9 th - 30 th of April 2020	1,805	To understand the experiences of people with asthma, to inform the organisation's public response and advocacy		
Pulse Survey	1	5 th – 8 th May 2020	435	General	To track how issues, impacts and sentiments changed over the course of COVID-19. Specific topics explored are listed on the left.
	2	12 th – 15 th May 2020	388	Mental health	
	3	19 th – 22 nd May 2020	347	Health service use	
	4	26 th – 29 th May 2020	269	Challenges due to asthma/COVID symptom overlap	
	5	9 th – 12 th June 2020	284	Cleaning chemicals Workplaces	
	6	23 rd – 26 th June 2020	236	Public transport use	
	7	7 th – 10 th July 2020	197	General	
	8	21 st – 23 rd July	267	Asthma challenges faced due to COVID	
	9	5 th – 7 th August 2020	219	Mask specific questions	
	10	19 th – 21 st August 2020	188	General	
	11	2 nd – 4 th September	224	Asthma challenges faced due to COVID	
	12	16 th – 19 th September	253	General	
Asthma and Mask Survey	14 th – 18 th August 2020	1,235	In response to masks/face coverings being made mandatory in some areas and insights from people with asthma, AA sought to understand the experiences of people with asthma when wearing face masks.		
COVID, Asthma and Healthcare Survey	25 th June - 11 th July 2021	1,263	In response to concerns raised by people with asthma about their access to healthcare, and to better understand attitudes towards the COVID-19 vaccination among people with asthma.		

SURVEY 1

COVID-19 AND ASTHMA SURVEY

Respondents

The survey was disseminated over a 3-week period to understand the experiences of people with asthma which would inform Asthma Australia’s public response and advocacy.

A total of 1,805 people responded to the survey, 88% were people with asthma and 12% completed the survey on behalf of someone they care for. Most respondents (79%) were female.

Figure 1: Age of person with asthma

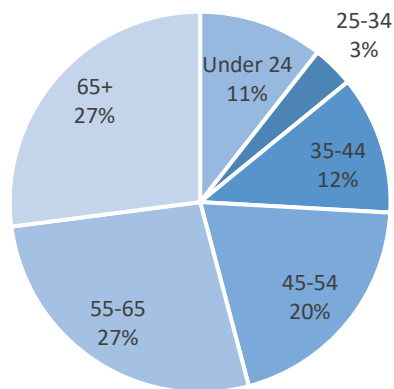
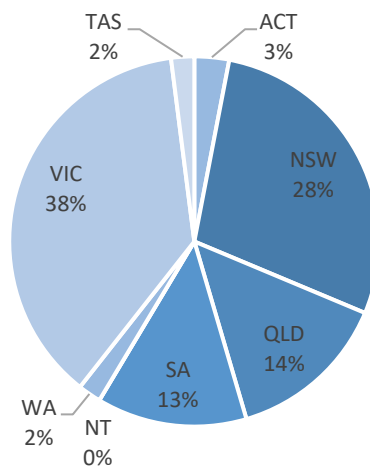


Figure 2: State



Findings

Anxiety about COVID-19

More than half of participants (54%) rated their anxiety about COVID-19 as a six or higher on a scale of 0-10. One in five people (19%) rated their anxiety at a 9 or 10. People with poorly controlled asthma, were more likely to be anxious about the COVID-19.

People with asthma spoke about their concern of contracting COVID-19, and what that would mean for them given their pre-existing respiratory problems. Participants mentioned concern about their risk as a person with asthma and the possible implications of contracting it including breathing difficulties, worsening asthma symptoms, the recovery period, being hospitalised and dying.

At the beginning of the pandemic, there was no specific data to suggest that people with asthma were at higher risk of contracting the virus or a high risk of experiencing serious illness if they contracted COVID-19. However, with a lack of definite information about their risk profile, there was been a high level of anxiety among people with asthma.

“Even though my asthma is completely under control, When I got influenza A 2 years ago my first symptom before any aches or fever was a severe emergency asthma attack and 4 days in hospital. Consequently, I am incredibly concerned about contracting COVID19 and uncertain when I will feel safe outside of my house again.”

Table 2: Level of anxiety about COVID-19

RATING	NSW	QLD	SA	VIC	All
5 th – 7 th August 2020	8%	7%	12%	9%	9%
5 th – 7 th August 2020	36%	36%	36%	37%	37%
5 th – 7 th August 2020	34%	37%	32%	36%	35%
5 th – 7 th August 2020	22%	19%	20%	17%	19%
5 th – 7 th August 2020	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

“Because I already have limited breathing capacity and still on an increased dosage to recover from bushfire smoke, my concern is that if I catch it I would more than like die. I caught a flu a couple of years ago and was in bed for 10 weeks, sickest I have been in my entire life. I thought I would lose my life from that flu but thankfully after 10 weeks and 3 courses of antibiotics I finally recovered. Covid-19 scares me and I feel let down as an asthmatic there is not enough information or direction to keep me safe. I have been self isolation since first advised by the Gov, my two children put restrictions on our home so all of us are in isolation to preserve my health.”

Preventive actions taken/self-isolation

Additionally, two-thirds of people with asthma reported they were self-isolating (67%). This meant staying at home and not leaving unless it is an emergency, not going to public places (e.g. shopping centres or work) and not having visitors. Of this, only 8% of people reported they were self-isolating due to government regulations (e.g. returning from recent travel). Most people with asthma were choosing to self-isolate to protect themselves due to concern about contracting COVID-19.

Table 3: People with asthma who reported self-isolating

Self-isolation status	NSW	QLD	SA	VIC	All Participants
Yes, due to government regulations	8%	6%	2%	10%	9%
Yes, due to protect myself or someone I live with	50%	44%	51%	48%	49%
Yes, I was recommended to by a health professional	10%	18%	10%	8%	11%
No, I am not self-isolating	31%	32%	36%	33%	31%

Impact on mental health

Nearly half of people with asthma (44%) reported experiencing new or increased symptoms of depression and anxiety. One quarter of people (25%) said feelings of anxiety, stress and depression had been triggering their asthma. The percentage of people reporting new or increased symptoms of anxiety and depression increased with decreasing asthma control, and vice versa, highlighting the known bidirectional impact between asthma and mental health.

Table 4: Mental health impacts among people with asthma

	NSW	QLD	SA	VIC	All Participants
Experienced new or increased symptoms of depression and anxiety	42%	47%	38%	45%	44%
Feelings of anxiety, stress and depression triggered asthma	25%	26%	23%	26%	25%

Access to medications

One quarter of people with asthma (26%) had faced challenges accessing their usual asthma medication. Additionally, 10% of people with asthma reported they did not have a 30-day supply of their asthma medication, as recommended. This was mainly due to the medication being out of stock. Participants mostly reported this being an issue for Symbicort, Flixotide and Ventolin/Salbutamol.

Access to healthcare

People with asthma began to experience changes to their usual healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic. One third of people with asthma (33%) reported concern about COVID-19 exposure at health services and nearly one in 10 people (8%) reported they had been unable to see their GP in person during this period for management of an asthma flare-up or for an asthma review.

Other challenges experienced by some people with asthma included not being able to perform spirometry and disruptions to regular care in a hospital setting.

Table 5: Access to healthcare among people with asthma

	NSW	QLD	SA	VIC	ALL PARTICIPANTS
Worried about COVID-19 exposure at health services	32%	32%	30%	34%	33%
Unable to see my GP for a review or management of a flare-up	8%	7%	9%	7%	8%
Unable to see my GP in person due to asthma symptoms suggesting COVID-19	6%	3%	4%	5%	7%

SURVEY 2

COVID PULSE SURVEYS

Respondents

To track how issues, impacts and sentiments changed over the course of COVID-19, Asthma Australia undertook regular surveys with a consenting group of participants from Survey 1. The Pulse Surveys also further explored challenges such as health service utilisation, mental health, and masks with participants to inform Asthma Australia's response during the pandemic.

The Pulse Surveys were disseminated over regular intervals (fortnightly, then monthly) between May and September 2020. Approximately 200-250 people responded to each survey (see table 1).

Findings

Anxiety and concern about COVID-19 over time

The level of anxiety about COVID-19 among people with asthma reduced over the course of 2020, however it did increase during the second wave of cases in Victoria. More than half (64%) of respondents still rated their anxiety about COVID-19 as a 5 or greater in the last Pulse Survey (September 2020).

Similarly, the level of concern about contracting COVID-19 as a person with asthma reduced over the course of the Pulse Surveys. However, 42% of people with asthma still reported they were concerned or very concerned about contracting COVID-19. This sentiment continued to be strong in open text responses across the Pulse Surveys. Despite evidence which showed people with asthma were at no greater risk of severe COVID-19 outcomes than people without, people with asthma continued to express significant concern about their risk profile and the outcome if they were to contract COVID-19 including being unable to breath, hospitalisation and death.

Figure 3: Percentage of respondents who rated their general level of anxiety about COVID-19 at a 5 or greater, on a scale of 0-10.

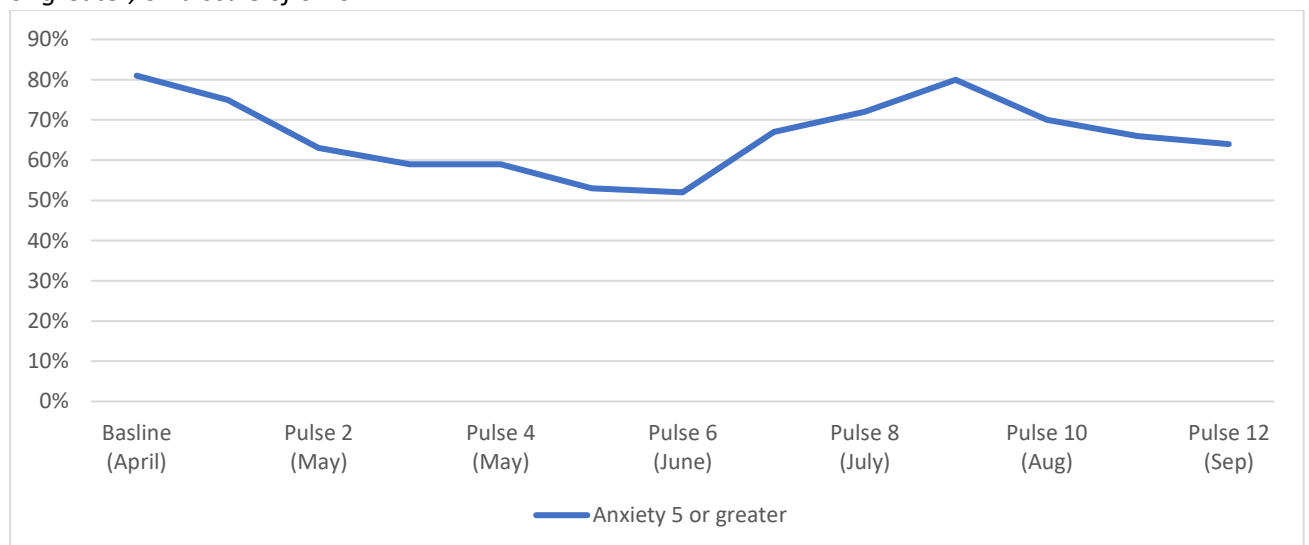
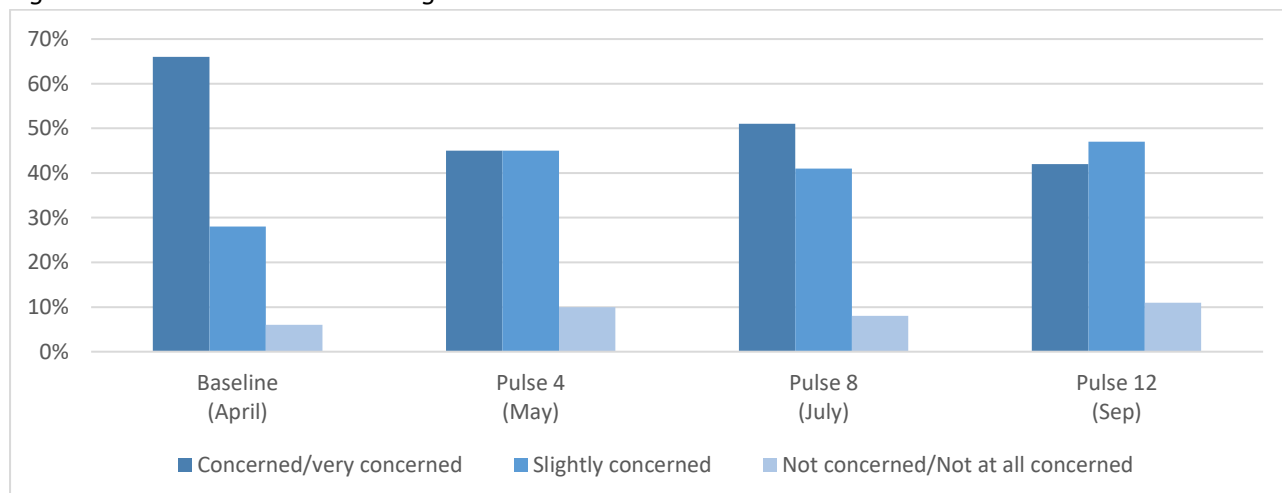


Figure 4: Concern about contracting COVID-19



“I have decided to stay at home during winter due to me being at high risk. I do not feel it will be that safe as when restrictions are lifted, even slightly, people will forget about being careful, not only for themselves but for other people.”

Pulse Survey 3

“COVID-19 is a respiratory disease. How bad is it going to be if I catch it as an asthmatic.”

Pulse Survey 5

“It is still very scary to think of my condition and that I might contract Covid 19.”

Pulse Survey 10

Access to healthcare over time (Pulse Survey 3, 8, 11)

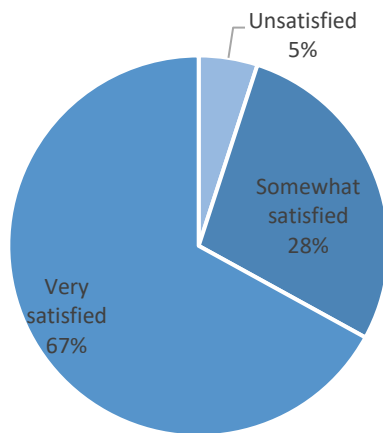
Participants were asked about different experiences accessing health several times over the Pulse Surveys.

Table 6: Challenges accessing healthcare in Pulse Surveys 3, 8, and 11

Pulse Survey 3	10% of respondents reported they thought about or needed to go to their doctor about their asthma but didn't
Pulse Survey 8	13% said I have been unable to see my/a doctor in person due to asthma symptoms which look like COVID-19 symptoms
	15% said I have had to be tested for COVID-19 at a health service when I presented with my usual asthma symptoms
	18% said I have had difficulty getting an appointment with my doctor or specialist due to COVID-19
Pulse Survey 11	9% said I have faced challenges accessing the healthcare I need
	8% I am unable to see my doctor in person due to asthma symptoms suggesting COVID-19
	10% I had a COVID-19 test due to regular asthma symptoms

Most respondents (71%) reported they had had a telehealth appointment with their GP during COVID-19 (Pulse Survey 8). Of those, most were very satisfied with their experience.

Figure 5: Satisfaction with telehealth appointments



"I am worried that despite having a flare up that is being treated, I actually haven't been examined. The doctor is depending on my ability to report accurately what is happening. Information and advice is very piecemeal."

Pulse Check 3

"I was very happy with Telehealth. It is great if you haven't got a serious health issue & don't need to visit the doctor but I prefer face to face!!"

Pulse Check 8

"It's [telehealth] just so much better for script renewals, follow ups on tests or script changes etc. Not being in a waiting room is brilliant."

Pulse Check 8

"Consultations consist of very short conversations, average 4/8 minutes [for telehealth], felt/feel I was not given the opportunity to address any new concerns/management. Reluctant to ask for help now as I feel a nuisance."

Pulse Check 8

"The doctor cant listen to your lungs or do physical exams [during telehealth] which I normally need for my asthma check-ups"

Pulse Check 8

"We have not been able to access adequate medical GP care due to the practises fear that we may have covid even with a negative test. My daughters preventer has been out of stock and we are at risk of not being able to get it. Finally, after months of saying "no hassles" a big asthma attack for two of us has hi lighted a significant issue."

Pulse Survey 10

"I feel like we now have McDonald's medicine. My GP comes to my car, looks at me, says you have a flair of asthma, follow your asthma plan, here is a covid form go and get tested."

Pulse Survey 11

"I couldn't get past the Covid checkpoint at the medical centre when taking my daughter to the dentist because of my asthma cough."

Pulse Survey 4

Social stigma and impacts (Pulse Survey 4, 11)

One quarter of respondents (27%) reported they had faced challenges due to their asthma symptoms being similar to common COVID-19 symptoms (Pulse Survey 4). Most people reported feeling stigmatised in the community due to their asthma symptoms looking like COVID-19. Some people reported difficulty accessing health services due to the symptom cross-over, regularly being required to have COVID-19 testing, and apprehension from employers for them to return to work.

This continued to be reported in future Pulse Surveys, with 19% of people with asthma reporting they had experienced negative reactions from the public due to asthma symptoms in September (Pulse Survey 8).

"Autumn/Winter has seen my son coughing with the cooler moist air. People to understand that asthmatics cough to clear the mucas that builds up to clear there chest. Stares and bully's at school if he forgets to cover his mouth in time. Kids don't know and had said to him germs oh you must have covid that lifts him anxious then asthma gets worse."

Pulse Survey 4

"Asthma cough difficult to control at present and SO obvious at times. People give you terrible looks and really avoid you and makes me feel so awful. Forever having to explain myself now during this pandemic , by saying its not contagious it is asthma."

Pulse Survey 4

"'Covid Cough' was repeatedly yelled at me over and over again by a man in the street. I had coughed with my asthma."

Pulse Survey 4

"People looked at me fearfully / suspiciously, but I have to say 'It's my asthma!'"

Pulse Survey 4

"Being an asthmatic makes me very self conscious in public about my coughing for me 90% of the time coughing is my only symptom as everyone assumes you have covid 19 and I've found my self using a releaver inhaler for very mild symptoms and or taking more than I really need to treat symptoms to releave cough to prevent stares."

Pulse Survey 11

"I have asthma and my asthma is much worse than usual due to my anxiety through covid"

Pulse Survey 7

COVID-19 cleaning impacts on asthma – Pulse Survey 5

Almost one-third of participants reported experiencing asthma symptoms or a flare-up as a result of increased cleaning products in their home, workplace or other location during COVID-19. This was higher for people with asthma who reported they were currently working outside the home (36%).

SURVEY 3

ASTHMA AND MASKS SURVEY

Respondents

The survey was disseminated over a 5-day period in response to masks/face coverings being made mandatory in some areas of Australia and inquiries from people with asthma. It sought to better understand and quantify the experiences of people with asthma when wearing face masks.

A total of 1,235 people responded to the survey. Only people with asthma could respond to this survey. Most respondents (86%) were female. Half of respondents (51%) were living in an area where face masks were mandatory at the time of responding.

Figure 6: Age of person with asthma

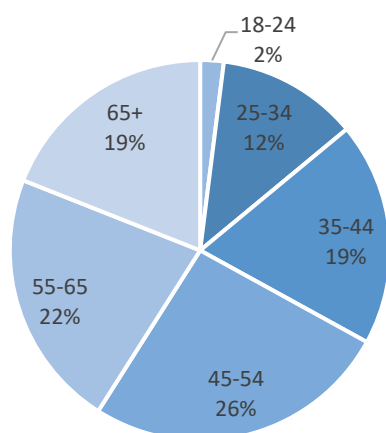
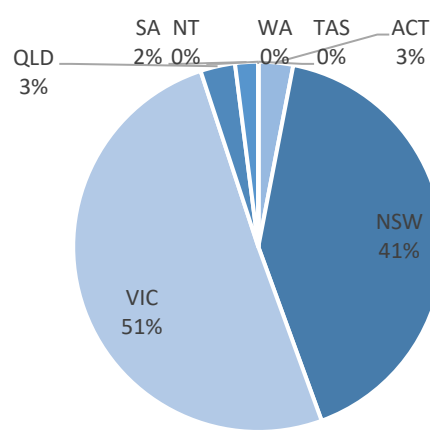


Figure 7: State



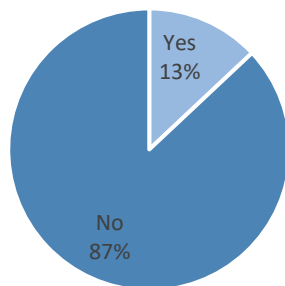
Findings

Most people with asthma (72%) supported the use of face masks outside of the home as a preventative measure for the spread of COVID-19, and reported it makes them feel protected (70%). However, some people with asthma still report challenges wearing mask. One third of respondents (33%) reported they experience anxiety when wearing a mask.

Table 7: Face mask attitudes and behaviours

	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree
I feel comfortable wearing a face mask	37%	23%	40%
I experience anxiety when wearing a face mask	48%	18%	33%
Everyone should wear a face mask when outside their home	10%	18%	72%
I experience breathing difficulties wearing a face mask	29%	16%	55%
Wearing a face mask has led to an asthma flare up	44%	26%	30%
Wearing a face mask makes me feel protected	11%	19%	70%
Wearing a mask has reduced exposure to asthma triggers (e.g. cold air, pollens and strong scents)	20%	34%	45%

Figure 8: Percentage of people who reported experiencing negative reactions from a member of the public when not wearing a face mask due to their asthma.



“When I wear a mask, I have problems breathing. I take a mask when I go shopping, but my asthma gets worse, because I can't breathe. what should I do...”

Pulse Survey 7

“As a Personal Carer I now have to wear a mask due to Covid cases in region, finding this incredibly hard to breath with, wheeze increases and voice is definitely effected plus tiredness increased on mask wearing work days. Know I have to wear for the greater good but it is surely causing stress and concern”

Pulse Survey 8

I am in Victoria with compulsory mask wearing and I am Finding wearing a mask makes my breathing more difficult. I can get an exemption from GP but I would not feel safe going into the community without the protection.”

Pulse Survey 8

SURVEY 4

COVID-19, ASTHMA AND HEALTHCARE SURVEY

Respondents

The survey was disseminated over a 2-week period in response to concerns raised by people with asthma about their access to healthcare, and to better understand attitudes towards the COVID-19 vaccination among people with asthma.

A total of 1,263 people responded to the survey, 89% were people with asthma and 11% completed the survey on behalf of someone they care for. Most respondents (87%) were female.

Figure 9: Age of person with asthma

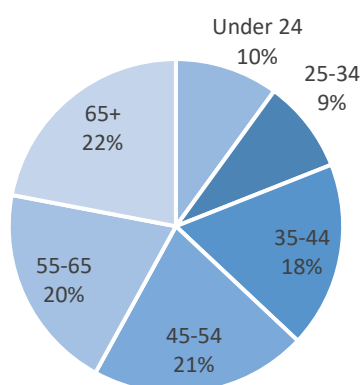
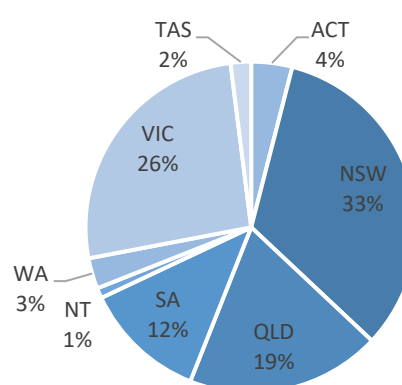


Figure 10: State



Findings

Access to Healthcare

Respondents reported significant challenges accessing healthcare in the previous 3 months. Three quarters (75%) of respondents reported they had experienced at least one of the below challenges.

30% had been unable to see their doctor in person until returning a negative COVID-19 test due to asthma symptoms looking like COVID-19.

34% had been unable to see their doctor in person due to asthma symptoms looking like COVID-19.

48% had put off going to my GP about their asthma due to asthma symptoms looking like COVID-19.

28% had put off going to see my GP because they were required to get a COVID-19 test.

Table 8: Percentage of people who reported the following challenges accessing healthcare

Statement	NSW	QLD	SA	Victoria
Have been unable to see their doctor in person until returning a negative COVID-19 test due to asthma symptoms looking like COVID-19	34%	28%	34%	28%
Have been unable to see their doctor in person due to asthma symptoms looking like COVID-19	34%	35%	39%	35%
Have put off going to my GP about their asthma due to asthma symptoms looking like COVID-19.	50%	50%	51%	44%
Have put off going to see my GP because they were required to get a COVID-19 test	30%	25%	34%	25%

Respondents described many experiences from the last three months where they have faced challenges accessing healthcare for their asthma. The most common challenge respondents faced was difficulty seeing their doctor due to long waiting times and/or being required to have a negative COVID-19 test before the appointment due to the overlap of COVID-19 and asthma symptoms. Participants also reported significant frustration about the inability to access in person appointments where their doctor could listen to their chest/symptoms and perform tests.

People with asthma continue to feel judged and isolated due to the cross over between asthma and COVID-19 symptoms. They report feeling frustrated, discouraged, embarrassed, anxious, let down, not listened to and like their asthma is not important.

When my kids get a sore throat, it is always a worry. It means going straight for a Covid test, sitting in a car, waiting, then calling a doctor with the promise of test results-and then dealing with the escalating asthma. Sitting in a car with feverish kids, tight chests, coughing and cold air is not ideal. Calling around for a willing doctor is tough as receptionists do not understand one fact: asthma does NOT wait for Covid results.

Yes I was made to get a Covid test as the doctor wouldn't put due to asthma on my doctors certificate for my work even when I pointed out that my symptoms were clearly from asthma. I was made to feel like a leper and I felt humiliated as the doctor wouldn't listen to me about my symptoms. Horrible experience and even though my asthma continues I'm quite reluctant to go back and see my doctor again. I'm battling through by myself.

I feel that because initially my first telehealth appointment was by phone my GP was not able to assess the severity of my asthma and thus it worsened.

Access for asthma has been non-existent unless you are asymptomatic, and it is a routine visit for repeat medication scripts. The main change I want to see before someone dies is an end to refusing to see pts, sending them for a swab instead, then making them self-isolate at home alone with an asthma exacerbation for 24-48hrs until the results are back. Could well be too late for some of us.

These experiences have led to delayed access to health care and people choosing to manage their asthma at home, where they would have usually sought professional care. People with asthma told us this has caused:

- More severe asthma symptoms or asthma symptoms worsening before they can access medical care,
- Symptoms last longer or taking longer to recover from asthma flare-ups, resulting in increased time off work and school, and
- Avoidable emergency department presentations or hospital admissions.

Whereas in the past I would've continued seeing my doctor to get on top of symptoms, I feel discouraged from doing so, not necessarily by my GP but generally.

I just don't go and see my GP to be totally honest. So hard when you also have a toddler bringing home daycare sniffles every 2 weeks, flairs up your asthma and neither of you can see a GP because a) you can't get a booking for 2-3 weeks, but you also have covid like symptoms without having covid. You're only option is another covid test.

Yes. My asthma has got worse. I visited the local hospital for a covid test and they didn't check my asthma. Told me to go to my doctor. When I went to doctor I was told I should not have come there until I received my covid test results. By then I could have been dead.

I ended up in emergency because I had been putting off going to the doc because of asthma symptoms. then ended up very unwell, asthma plan didn't work, nurse on call called ambos... spent over half a day in emergency.

I had severe asthma and had to wait to get a negative test result before seeing doctor. My asthma got worse resulting in a serve asthma attack.

Telehealth

Nearly half (45%) of respondents reported they had seen their doctor via telehealth (video or phone) for their asthma in the last 3 months. However, most people with asthma reported a preference for face-to-face consultations for their asthma, feeling this best allows their doctor to assess their asthma symptoms.

Table 9: Attitudes towards telehealth among people with asthma

Statement	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	n/a
I prefer telehealth appointments for my asthma	54%	26%	15%	5%
All doctors' appointments about asthma should be in person	13%	24%	61%	1%
It has been difficult to have an appointment in person for my asthma since COVID-19.	28%	17%	56%	

I feel that because initially my first telehealth appointment was by phone my GP was not able to assess the severity of my asthma and thus it worsened.

Reduced medication and lack of proper treatment as a result of no person to person contact. They have been unable to listen too my chest adequately and as a result 3 hospital admissions.

Vaccination

Half of participants (50%) reported they had already received one or both doses of a COVID-19 Vaccine. People with asthma had similar attitudes towards COVID-19 vaccinations as the general population¹.

Figure 11: Percentage of people who agreed/disagreed with the statement “When a COVID-19 vaccine becomes available and is recommended for me, I will get it.”

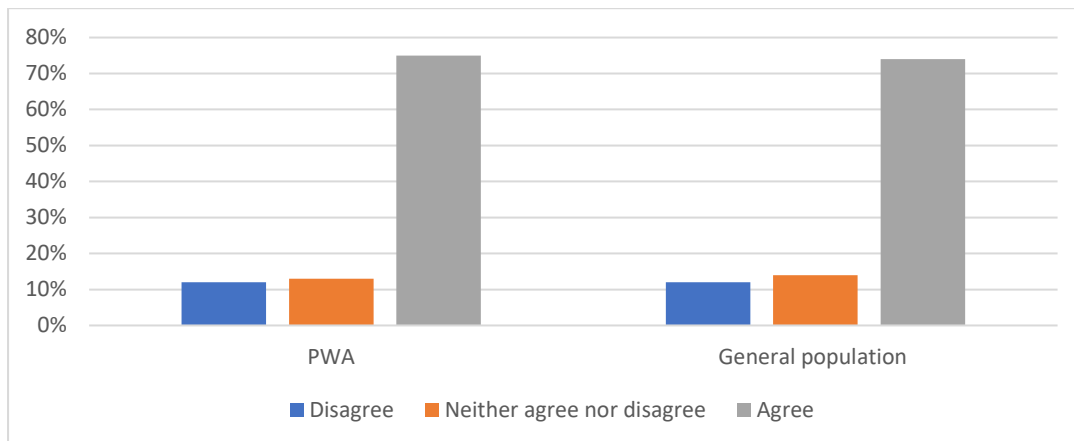
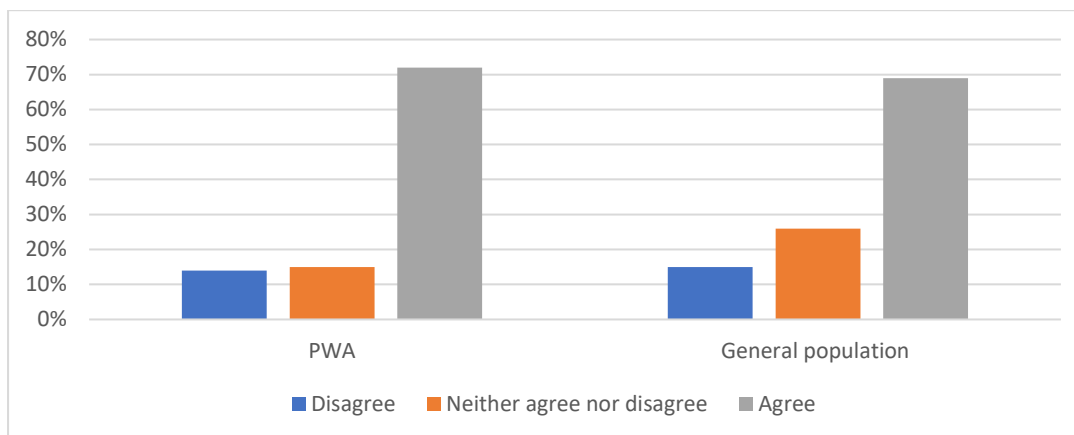


Figure 12: Percentage of people who agreed/disagreed with the statement “I will try to get a COVID-19 vaccination as soon as it is available to me.”



¹ ABS 2021, Household impacts of COVID-19 June 2021, ABS, accessed online: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/household-impacts-covid-19-survey/jun-2021>

The most common questions and concerns people with asthma reported about the COVID-19 vaccination were:

- Hesitancy about the speed at which the vaccine was developed.
- Side-effects to the vaccine, including long-term side effects.
- Which vaccine was safer for people with asthma.
- Frustration about lack of access to vaccinations because of individual perception of their COVID-19 risk as a person with asthma .

my asthma is new and I don't fully understand the triggers, and I got very sick after my flu shot so I am very uncertain about what to expect with the Covid vaccine. I feel quite anxious about having it but know I am at risk without it.

As a steroid dependent immunocompromised 52yr old I was included in 1b phase and was thankful to get vaccinated BUT I feel I got second rate vaccine (Astra). If I didn't have such crappy asthma (and other serious comorbidities) I would have waited for Pfizer or better vax

Very frustrating that we were told that if we got covid we would get severe covid so spent a lot of time at home protecting ourselves then when vaccine was announced we were left behind

Asthmatics should have been prioritised for Pfizer as well. I'm in the higher risk age group with severe asthma, and yet there were no exemptions for this lung condition or the fact I'm under 40. Instead, my sensible doctor who knows my medical history went ahead and recommended my for the vaccine even though I'm in group 2B , but I had to sign a waiver for AZ as it was the only option for my age group and I would have been turned away from the federal vaccination hubs.

I feel worried as a younger adult (27) and asthmatic for being denied access to the vaccine because the Gov is denying asthmatics priority. My asthma gets very unwell, difficult to manage with a common cold so I worry how unwell COVID would be without a vaccination to help protect me.

I have had 2 AstraZeneca. My perception of risk meant I saw covid itself a great risk than side effects on a vaccine. All chemicals have side effects.



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