

**MEDIA RELEASE****January 23, 2020****Bushfire smoke heightens asthma risk at back to school time: Parents and schools urged to be asthma ready as students return for 2020**

- Exposure to poor air quality from months of unprecedented bushfires could trigger more asthma flare ups in school-age children, further complicating the back to school season which sees annual spikes in childhood asthma hospitalisations and flare ups.
- Asthma Australia has partnered with TerryWhite Chemmart pharmacists to provide support and information to parents to help get their children asthma ready for the 2020 school year with their Back to School Asthma campaign, check lists and in store support.
- In 2016/2017, 5668 Victorian children were hospitalised with asthma. Asthma Australia is hoping to reduce hospitalisations of children with asthma by 50 per cent by 2030.
- With the Australian Tennis Open qualifiers highlighting health risks of reduced air quality for athletes, Asthma Australia says the same health risks apply to school age children. As part of their back to school asthma message they are urging schools to have an air quality plan, if they haven't already.

With bushfire smoke blanketing communities for weeks going on months, and in some cases triggering breathing difficulties, Asthma Australia has partnered with TerryWhite Chemmart pharmacists to help parents get their children asthma ready for the new school year.

According to Asthma Australia, researchers have found that there is a rise in asthma flare-ups when children return to school after the Christmas break. Known as 'back to school asthma' these flare ups result in a significant increase in Emergency Department visits, hospitalisations and days off school. Already, Victorian emergency calls out for patients are well above average, raising additional concerns for school-age children.

In 2016/2017, 5668 young people aged 0-19 years in Victoria were hospitalised due to complications with asthma. More than 460,000 Australians under the age of 14 have asthma (10.1%). It is the leading cause of disease burden<sup>1</sup> for Australians aged 0-14 years and is a common cause of school absenteeism due to chronic illness. In 2014/2015<sup>2</sup>, 42 per cent of Australians aged 0-14 took time off school due to their asthma.

However, approximately 80 per cent of asthma hospitalisations in Australia are considered avoidable and asthma education and preparation can make a significant difference to reducing this burden.

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<sup>1</sup> Burden of disease is one way to measure the impact of different diseases or injuries on a population. This is done by measuring how many years of life Australia loses to diseases, either due to people dying early, or living their remaining years affected by ill health. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/fe037cf1-0cd0-4663-a8c0-67cd09b1f30c/aihw-aus-222.pdf.aspx?inline=true>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/fe037cf1-0cd0-4663-a8c0-67cd09b1f30c/aihw-aus-222.pdf.aspx?inline=true>

In 2020, Asthma Australia and TerryWhite Chemmart are committed to helping parents better manage their children's asthma through their Back-to-School Asthma education campaign, which includes a **Back to School checklist** and a medication review with their pharmacist.

"Following this year's extreme bushfire season resulting in extended exposure to poor air quality, this campaign has never been so important. Children with asthma are especially susceptible and even more so at back-to-school time. Parents whose children may be showing symptoms from smoke exposure should seek advice from their doctor before heading back to school as their medication and Asthma Action Plans may need to be updated. Across the board, we have seen a spike in breathing difficulties and emergency call outs over this holiday period," said Asthma Australia CEO Michelle Goldman.

The Back to School Asthma campaign with TerryWhite Chemmart offers free resources and parents are strongly encouraged to engage with an Asthma Australia asthma educator or a pharmacist about ways to minimise risk.

TerryWhite Chemmart pharmacist Chris Campbell said community pharmacists were available and ready to help parents get across the ins and outs of good asthma management.

"Pharmacists are available to help parents on the proper use of inhalation devices, the triggers and warning signs for an attack and how to respond in the event this happens," he said.

"It's easy to be overwhelmed by asthma, with so many different types and sizes of inhalation attachments, such as spacers, pharmacists at TerryWhite Chemmart can help find the right one for children before heading back to school."

Studies show that adding a correctly sized spacer to an inhaler can improve drug delivery to the lungs by 40-60 per cent<sup>3</sup>. For this reason, it is important children and adults always use a spacer in conjunction with their puffer.

For Wantirna resident Penelope Connolly, her husband Matthew and three children – Hannah (13), Beatrice (12) and Heidi (9), the Back-to-School campaign is a great reminder for her family to get asthma ready for school. Their daughter Beatrice was diagnosed with asthma at age three when she was in hospital with a virus and suffered an acute attack.

"This was the first of numerous asthma-related hospital visits which means Beatrice misses days off school, can't attend swimming carnivals, has to stay inside at school when it is windy, smoky or poor air quality and she misses out on some play time," she said.

Mrs Connolly said Beatrice's asthma impacted the whole family, putting extra strain on siblings to monitor and report symptoms at school. She said taking preventative measures heading into the new school year was critical.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC459957/>

To get 'asthma ready' for school, she will review Beatrice's asthma action plan with her GP, get advice from the pharmacy about replacing spacers/nebuliser equipment, meet with her new teacher to explain the emergency action plan and discuss triggers and symptoms.

"We also have a second action plan for when Beatrice is a little unwell or may be exposed to triggers we email the school for them to administer further Ventolin and keep a closer eye on her."

Ms Goldman explained that many parents were expressing concerns about sending their asthmatic children back to school in reduced air quality conditions and she urged schools have an air quality plan if they hadn't already.

"We understand this is a really worrying time for many parents, and this bushfire crisis has been unprecedented for everyone. Our team have developed a list of questions parents can ask schools, and information to support schools directly, available on our blog page," she said.

"We do urge schools to adapt and respond to reduced air quality days, particularly at this high-risk time. Particularly because children are a vulnerable group and participate in outdoor sports and enjoy stretching their legs during lunch breaks."

The 2020 Back to School Asthma campaign encourages parents to:

- Visit their local GP to get an updated Asthma Action Plan
- Visit their local TerryWhite Chemmart to talk to a pharmacist about the necessary reliever medication and correct use and maintenance of spacers. TerryWhite Chemmart pharmacies are providing free spacer labels in preparation for the new school year.
- Provide the school with a copy of their child's asthma action plan as well as a reliever and spacer/spacer with mask, to be kept at school in case of an asthma attack.
- Talk to your child's teacher about school and asthma management for your child, especially if they are being exposed to smoke from bushfires.
- Only provide face masks to protect against smoke exposure from bushfires if your children are over the age of 14. Face masks are not recommended for children under 14 because they are not considered effective or safe for children. Face masks must be form fitting and generally children's faces are too small to create a tight seal.

For more information **download the Back to School checklist** to ensure your child is asthma ready for school by visiting [asthma.org.au/being-asthma-ready-for-school-starts-now/](https://asthma.org.au/being-asthma-ready-for-school-starts-now/). Asthma Australia have developed a range of informative blogs to provide additional support to parents and schools to respond to reduced air quality.

For more information about preparing an asthma management plan, see your local GP or TerryWhite Chemmart pharmacist, visit [asthmaaustralia.org.au](https://asthmaaustralia.org.au) or call **1800 ASTHMA** Helpline (1800 278 462).

**ENDS**

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**About Asthma Australia**

For over 50 years Asthma Australia has been the leader in asthma health care, research and support. Asthma Australia delivers evidence-based preventative health strategies to over 500,000 people every year and provides support, training and resources to the primary health care sector. The organisation funds vital basic science and population health research contributing to national and international understandings of asthma and how best to manage the disease.

**About TerryWhite Chemmart**

TerryWhite Chemmart is one of Australia's largest retail pharmacy networks and a leader in the delivery of frontline healthcare. With more than 450 community pharmacies across Australia, we are committed to ensuring every Australian has easier access to pharmacists and expert health advice every day. TerryWhite Chemmart provides high-quality, accessible and cost-effective community-based health care services and programs.