

Thursday 6 July 2023

[Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee](#)

Parliament of Victoria
Parliament House
Spring Street
East Melbourne, Victoria, 3002

Dear Committee Members,

Re: Inquiry into the rental and housing affordability crisis in Victoria

Asthma Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide our response to the Inquiry into the rental and housing affordability crisis in Victoria. Housing is a key social determinant of health, and particularly important for asthma as housing conditions influence an individual's asthma control and risk of developing asthma. With climate change and the increasing presence of asthma triggers and occurrence of extreme weather events, the health of our homes becomes ever important. Victorians will increasingly seek refuge in their homes from climate-driven events, yet conditions within homes can quickly become unhealthy from bushfire smoke entering leaky homes, extreme heat, or mould caused by heavy rainfall and flooding. These impacts are exacerbated by the absence of good housing design, construction and maintenance.

In this response, Asthma Australia briefly sets out the importance of housing to health and provides insights into the health of our nation's homes using consumer research we conducted in 2022, as well as common barriers that prevent individuals making their homes healthier. We also present our recommendations to help ensure everyone can live in a healthy home.

THE ADEQUACY OF REGULATION: STANDARDS AND CONDITIONS OF RENTAL HOUSING

There are many features of a home that can influence health and wellbeing, including physical structures and their ability to provide shelter, security, privacy and space, access to fuel and electricity and protection from pollutants, hazards, mould, and pests.¹ We know that poorly designed and maintained homes can present significant health risks as they can:

- **Harbour indoor triggers** - substances to which people with asthma and allergies are sensitive - such as mould, dust mites and pest infestations. For instance, pests are sources of allergens and can cause allergic reactions and trigger asthma while no amount of mould is considered safe for human health and exposure to it can lead to asthma flare-ups and other health issues.
- Be **poorly sealed** against outside pollutants such as smoke, dust and pollen; all common triggers for asthma flare-ups and contribute to its development.
- Be **inadequately ventilated** to remove accumulated air pollutants and harmful substances.

- Be fuelled by **harmful energy sources** such as gas cooktops and gas and woodfire heaters, which emit pollutants such as nitrogen dioxide and fine particulate matter that can trigger and cause asthma symptoms. Cooking with gas is estimated to be responsible for up to 12% of the childhood asthma burden in Australia.¹

HOMES, HEALTH AND ASTHMA RESEARCH

In 2022, Asthma Australia undertook a nationally representative survey of 5,041 people to understand how healthy Australian homes are for people with asthma or allergies, and those at risk of developing asthma.² In particular, we sought to uncover how common the following triggers are in Australian homes: mould, emissions from cooking, heating and pests, and to understand what actions people take, and whether they face any barriers, to reduce these triggers in their homes. We set out some of key research findings below (you can access the full report: [Homes, Health and Asthma in Australia](#)).

EXPOSURE TO TRIGGERS

Homes are not healthy places for all Australians, particularly people with asthma or allergies. Among respondents with asthma and allergies, **three in ten reported that their symptoms are worse after spending time in the home**. In addition, many people are exposed to asthma triggers in their home:

- **70% of respondents had pests** including spiders, ants, cockroaches, dust mites and mice in their home in the last 12 months.
- **50% of respondents had mould or dampness** in their home in the last 12 months.
- **48% of respondents use a gas cooktop and 7% of respondents use unflued gas heating.** Unflued gas heaters are particularly dangerous as pollutants remain inside the home rather than being vented outside.
- **13% of respondents use wood heaters.**

The following population groups who are **more vulnerable to the effects of triggers** and/or have greater likelihood of having asthma or developing it, were also more likely to report **greater exposure to triggers** in their homes than other respondents:

- **People with asthma and allergies** were 1.4 times more likely to report mould and dampness, 1.5 times more likely to report pests and 1.2 times more likely to report having unflued gas heating.
- **People with children** in their home were 1.7 times more likely to report dampness, 1.6 times more likely to report mould, 1.4 times more likely to report having pests and using gas cooktops. Asthma is the leading cause of burden of disease for people aged 5–14 years and children aged 0-14 years are much more likely than adults to be hospitalised for asthma, constituting 43% of the 25,000 hospitalisations for a primary diagnosis of asthma in Australia in 2020-21.³
- **People living in social housing** were 2 times more likely to report mould and dampness and 1.7 times more likely to report having pests in their home. The prevalence of asthma is 13% for people living in the lowest socioeconomic area compared with 10% for those living in the highest

socioeconomic area.⁴ People from the lowest socioeconomic group have around 6 times the rate of fatal burden for asthma in Australia than people from the highest group.⁵

- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people** were 6.5 times more likely to report dampness, 2.3 times more likely to report mould, 2 times more likely to report pests and 1.5 times more likely to report unflued gas heating. The prevalence of asthma among Indigenous Australians was 1.6 times as high as non-Indigenous Australians in 2019.⁶

BARRIERS TO REDUCING TRIGGERS

Many of the research respondents reported the following barriers to reducing triggers within the home:

- **Lack of autonomy over property**

Half of respondents who **rent or live in social housing** reported they were unable to make changes to protect themselves from cooking emissions or take action against mould and pests **because they do not own their home**. People described frustration with their landlord's/provider's lack of action, and concern about requesting action in case they increased rent or evicted them in today's highly competitive housing market. Some of their comments include:

I live in a rental house during a rental crisis so I do not want to do anything that will make the real estate want to remove me from the property.

I rent, and the property manager takes ages to get back to me. There is currently mould in all rooms as since rainy days have come, I've noticed all the windows leak. They have not replied to my email. It took them six months to address the fact I had no hot water so I'm not holding my breath.

I would like things done but [am] afraid the owner will put up the rent. The extraction fan in the bathroom has never worked and I have been here over 3 years. The owner knows about it.

Door frames and window frames in my property leak air, and this allows entry to insect pests, and there are holes in the floor which allows entry to mice and insects. I cannot afford to have these fixed and the manager of my property (government housing) refuses to fix them.

I am in a government property. I am not allowed to install things into the property and have to get approval. My requests have been declined because it is seen as not required/unnecessary, and I'm told I just have to clean more.

In addition, 13% of people living in social housing and 9% of renters said they were not happy with the air quality inside their home, compared to 4% of homeowners. Similarly, 16% of people living in social housing and 17% of renters said they are not confident to make changes to improve the air quality inside their home, compared to 9% of homeowners.

- **Cost**

One quarter of respondents said it is too expensive to purchase or use equipment, like air purifiers, to help reduce triggers while cooking or to tackle mould and pests. Air purifiers with HEPA (high-

efficiency particulate absorbing) filters can be highly effective in reducing indoor air pollution.⁷ Additionally, among respondents who did not have their preferred heating or cooktop type, 47% said cost was a barrier to changing to their preferred type. This is despite the fact that gas and wood heating and gas cooktops are more expensive to run than electric appliances.

- **Lack of concern or knowledge**

38% of people stated that they were not concerned about taking action to address at least one of the triggers and 18% reported that they do not know what to do to protect themselves against at least one of the triggers. Lack of knowledge/concern highlights the need for a **public health approach to healthy housing**, including improved regulations for design, construction and maintenance and education about healthy homes to ensure everyone is protected from health risks within the home.

Certain population groups, who were also more likely to report having triggers in the home, were more likely to report barriers to taking action to reduce triggers. Again, they included people more vulnerable to the effects of triggers including people renting, living in social housing and from lower income households, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and people with asthma and allergies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Australian homes should be safe, healthy places, free from harmful substances or equipped to appropriately eliminate them but as evidenced in our research, too often homes are not healthy environments. We provide our recommendations below on how the Victorian Government can help improve the state's housing stock to support the health of residents. Many of these actions will also future-proof homes against climate change and its compounding, detrimental effect on home health.

Recommendation 1: That the Victorian Government enhance design and construction standards to ensure *all* new homes are 'healthy homes' and resilient to the challenges of climate change.

Improved standards should include:

- The electrification of all energy sources for cooking, cooling and heating, and
- Increased thermal efficiency, ventilation and air tightness to enable homes to respond to indoor and outdoor triggers.

Recommendation 2: That the Victorian Government develop incentives for landlords to improve the health of private rental homes without disadvantaging current or future tenants.

Incentives should help landlords to electrify their properties, address damp and mould issues and improve ventilation and air tightness.

Recommendation 3: That the Victorian Government undertake sustainable improvements to the health of the existing social housing stock. Improvements should include electrifying properties, addressing damp and mould issues and improving ventilation and air tightness.

Recommendation 4: That the Victorian Government support low-income households to improve home health by providing financial support to:

- Switch from gas and wood heating and gas cooking appliances to efficient, electric home heating, cooling and cooking, such as reverse cycle air conditioning and induction cooktops.
- Increase thermal efficiency, ventilation and air tightness to improve indoor air quality.
- Buy HEPA air purifiers to improve indoor air quality.

Recommendation 5: That the Victorian Government phase out wood heaters in residential areas by:

- Prohibiting the installation of wood heaters in homes in residential areas,
- Requiring wood heaters to be removed on sale of homes in residential areas,
- Providing financial support, particularly to low-income households, to cover the costs of replacing wood heaters with efficient, electric heating, and
- Educating households about the health impacts of using wood heaters.

Recommendation 6: That the Victorian Government support all households to switch from gas to electricity as soon as possible by:

- Prohibiting the installation of gas appliances in homes,
- Abolishing gas disconnection fees,
- Ceasing to offer gas appliances through the Victorian Energy Upgrade Program,
- Committing to no new gas connections by 2025, and
- Educating households about the health impacts of using gas in the home.

Asthma Australia welcomes being contacted by the Committee for any future contributions to this important Inquiry.

Yours sincerely,



Michele Goldman
CEO Asthma Australia

ABOUT ASTHMA AUSTRALIA

Asthma Australia is a for-purpose, consumer organisation which has been improving the lives of people with asthma since 1962. Asthma affects one in nine Australians or 2.7 million people. Asthma is an inflammatory condition of the airways, restricting airflow and it can be fatal. There is no cure, but most people with asthma can experience good control. Our purpose is to help people breathe better so they can live freely. We deliver evidence-based prevention and health strategies to more than half a million people each year.