

Monday 24 July 2023

Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Members,

Re: Inquiry into the worsening rental crisis in Australia

Asthma Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide our response to the Inquiry into the worsening rental crisis in Australia. 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 increasing the presence of asthma triggers and occurrence of extreme weather events, the health of our homes becomes ever important. People in Australia will increasingly need to seek refuge in their homes from climate-driven events, yet homes are often not healthy environments. Homes may harbour indoor air pollution from gas cooktops or triggers such as pests, while extreme weather events – such as bushfire smoke entering poorly sealed homes, extreme heat, and heavy rainfall and flooding causing mould or high humidity - can quickly deteriorate the health of homes. 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. We provide insights into the health of our nation's homes using consumer research we conducted in 2022, where findings highlight how people who rent privately or through social housing, or who have low incomes, are more frequently exposed to asthma and allergy triggers in their homes, and face barriers to making their homes healthier. As the rental crisis worsens, **people who rent homes in Australia are increasingly having to risk their health to secure a home**. This is not acceptable and Government action is needed to ensure that everyone can live in a healthy home, whether they own it or not. We provide our submission under other related matters to address the adequacy of regulation in terms of standards and conditions of rental housing.

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. 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, which are common triggers for asthma flare-ups and can contribute to the development of asthma.
- 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 key triggers - mould, emissions from cooking and heating and pests - are in Australian homes, and what actions people take, and the barriers they face, to reduce these triggers in their homes. We set out some of the key research findings below (access the full report here: [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 the pollutants they emit remain inside.
- **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.

¹ Knibbs, Woldeyohannes, Marks, Cowie, 2018. Damp housing, gas stoves and the burden of childhood asthma in Australia. MJA.208(7):299–302

² Asthma Australia, 2022. Housing, Health and Asthma in Australia. Available online: [AA2022_Housing-Survey-Report_full_v4.pdf \(asthma.org.au\)](#)

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 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, switch their heating fuel 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.

³ Australian Institute for Welfare and Housing (AIHW), 2023. Chronic Respiratory Conditions: Asthma. Web Article. Available online: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/chronic-respiratory-conditions/asthma-1>

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2021. Causes of Death, Australia. Canberra: ABS.

⁵ AIHW, 2023. Chronic Respiratory Conditions: Asthma. Web Article.

⁶ Ibid.

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 addressing 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: 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 - regardless of whether people own them or not - but as evidenced in our research, too often homes are not healthy environments. We provide our recommendations below on how the Australian Government can help improve Australia'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.

⁷ Centre for Air pollution, Energy and Health Research (CAR), 2022. Bushfire smoke: what are the health impacts and what can we do to minimise exposure? Available online: <https://www.car-cre.org.au/bushfire-smoke-factsheet>

Recommendation 1: That the Australian 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 improve indoor air quality.

Recommendation 2: That the Australian 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 thermal efficiency, ventilation and air tightness.

Recommendation 3: That the Australian Government provide funding to states and territories to make sustainable improvements to the health of the existing social housing stock.

Improvements should include electrifying properties, addressing damp and mould issues and improving thermal efficiency, ventilation and air tightness.

Recommendation 4: That the Australian 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.
- Purchase and operate HEPA air purifiers to improve indoor air quality.

Recommendation 5: That the Australian Government leads and coordinates a nationally consistent approach to the phasing out of wood heaters in residential areas by:

- Ensuring that the replacement of wood heaters is included in packages for the electrification of homes.
- Including the phasing out of wood heaters as a priority in the next National Clean Air Agreement work plan.
- Educating households about the health impacts of using wood heaters.

Recommendation 6: That the Australian Government leads and coordinates a nationally consistent approach to all Australian households switching from gas to electricity as soon as possible, including by:

- Ensuring that gas appliances and their emissions are considered in the development of national indoor air quality standards, which should be prioritised in the next National Clean Air Agreement work plan.
- Educating households about the health impacts of using gas appliances in the home.

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

Yours sincerely,



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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.