

CLIMATE CHANGE AMENDMENT (DUTY OF CARE AND INTERGENERATIONAL CLIMATE EQUITY) BILL 2023

Asthma Australia submission

October 2023

ABOUT ASTHMA AUSTRALIA

Asthma Australia is a for-purpose, consumer organisation which has been improving the lives of people with asthma since 1962.

Asthma is an inflammatory condition of the airways which restricts airflow. It can be fatal. There is no cure for asthma, but most people with asthma can experience good control of their condition. Asthma affects 1 in 9 people in Australia, or 2.7 million people. It has various degrees of severity (mild to severe) and affects people of all ages, from childhood to adulthood. Asthma can appear at all ages and stages of life.

Asthma Australia's 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. To ensure people can access effective treatments and best practice healthcare for their asthma, we work directly with people with asthma, their family and friends, health professionals, researchers, schools and governments. This way, we can ensure people with asthma are supported with education and access to high-quality information and care where they live, work and play in all stages of life.

ASTHMA IN AUSTRALIA

Asthma is one of the most common chronic conditions in Australia, with high prevalence compared to other countries. Around 2.7 million Australians have asthma¹ and the condition affects people of all ages. Asthma was the 8th leading contributor to the total burden of disease in Australia in 2022, having risen from 9th in 2018 and 10th in 2003, representing a 7.8% change since 2003.²

People with asthma experience poorer health outcomes and quality of life.³ They may live for a long period of time with disability associated with asthma, and experience reduced participation in paid employment, education, care responsibilities, sports and social events. Approximately 400 people die each year in Australia due to asthma⁴ and there were 351 deaths from asthma in 2021.⁵ Asthma mortality⁶ and hospitalisations⁷ in Australia are high by international standards.

ASTHMA AND CHILDREN IN AUSTRALIA

Asthma is the leading cause of burden of disease for children aged 5–14 years in Australia and 460,000 children have asthma. This represents 14.2% of the total disease burden for boys, and 11.7% for girls.⁸ Children are much more likely than adults to be hospitalised for asthma, with over 17,000 children with asthma hospitalised in 2022.⁹ Asthma is a key reason for missing school due to chronic illness,¹⁰ and 42% of children aged 0-14 had to take time off from school in 2014/15 due to their asthma.¹¹

ASTHMA AND CLIMATE CHANGE IN AUSTRALIA

Asthma is heavily influenced by environmental conditions as it can be both caused and exacerbated by exposure to environmental triggers. Asthma is also deeply linked with climate change and an adverse feedback loop exists in which the emissions that cause climate change both increase the risk of developing asthma and trigger asthma symptoms or exacerbations in people with asthma. This in turn increases the need for healthcare utilisation, generating additional greenhouse gas emissions. At the same time, climate change-driven conditions further increase the risk of developing asthma and trigger symptoms in people with asthma, continuing the adverse feedback loop.

The links between asthma and climate change are particularly concerning given the high prevalence of asthma in Australia, particularly among children. There are numerous climate change pathways that can cause and exacerbate asthma in Australia, including air pollution from bushfires, droughts and ground level ozone, mould caused by heavy rainfall and flooding, increased pollen production, thunderstorm asthma epidemics, and extreme temperatures.¹² The air pollution impacts of climate change particularly affect children.¹³ Overall, people with asthma – and those at risk of developing the condition – are particularly vulnerable to the risks associated with climate change in Australia.

ASTHMA AUSTRALIA’S POSITION ON THE CLIMATE CHANGE AMENDMENT (DUTY OF CARE AND INTERGENERATIONAL CLIMATE EQUITY) BILL 2023

Asthma Australia supports the proposed amendment to the Climate Change Act 2022. The Climate Change Amendment (Duty of Care and Intergenerational Climate Equity) Bill 2023 would impose a duty on decisionmakers to consider the health and wellbeing of current and future generations of children in Australia when making significant decisions that may contribute to climate change.

Fossil fuel extraction and power generation directly impact asthma outcomes by generating emissions that can increase the risk of developing asthma and trigger symptoms in people with asthma.¹⁴ Children are particularly vulnerable to air pollution because they take in higher amounts of air pollution due to their faster breathing rates, level of physical activity, height and breathing through their mouths, and because they have developing organs and immune systems.¹⁵ Further,

emissions from fossil fuel generation contribute substantially to Australia’s greenhouse gas emissions and the resulting warming climate which is responsible for increasingly frequent, severe and widespread phenomena which increase asthma risk.

With the prevalence and burden of asthma already high in Australia, particularly among children, every effort should be made to reduce risk factors for developing asthma and triggers for asthma symptoms and exacerbations. The proposed amendment would also help to uphold the rights of the child under the relevant United Nations Convention, including the right to “the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health”.¹⁶ Asthma Australia therefore supports the proposed duty of care and consideration by decisionmakers of the health and wellbeing of children in making significant decisions that may impact climate change.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). 2018. National Health Survey: First Results 2017-18. ABS Cat no. 4364.0.55.001. Available online:

<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/4364.0.55.0012017-1=8?OpenDocument>

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). Australian Burden of Disease Study 2022. Canberra: AIHW; 2022. Available online: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/burden-of-disease/australian-burden-of-disease-study-2022/contents/summary>

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/burden-of-disease/australian-burden-of-disease-study-2022/contents/interactive-data-on-disease-burden> AIHW. 2021

³ AIHW. 2019. Asthma. Cat. no. ACM 33. Available online:

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⁴ ABS. 2020. Causes of Death, Australia, 2019. Available online:

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/causes-death/causes-death-australia/2019>

⁵ ABS. 2022. Causes of Death, Australia, 2021. Available online:

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/causes-death/causes-death-australia/2020>

⁶ Commonwealth of Australia. 2017. National Asthma Strategy 2018. Available online:

https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2019/09/national-asthma-strategy-2018_0.pdf

⁷ Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD). 2017. Health at a Glance 2017. Available online:

https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/health_glance-2017-en.pdf?expires=1611031021&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=CFFC61839E2237B8267DE851825F8967

⁸ AIHW. 2022. Australian Burden of Disease Study 2022. Available online:

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/burden-of-disease/australian-burden-of-disease-study-2022/contents/about>

⁹ AIHW. Principal diagnosis data cubes. Separation statistics by principal diagnosis, 2018-19, 2017-18, 2016-17.

Available online: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/hospitals/principal-diagnosis-data-cubes/contents/summary>

¹⁰ Australian Government Productivity Commission. 2020. Report on Government Services. Available online:

<https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2020>

¹¹ ABS. 2017. Health Service Usage and Health Related Actions Australia 2014-15. Available online:

<https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/4364.0.55.0022014-15?OpenDocument>

¹² See e.g.: Salas R N, Solomon C G. 2019. The Climate Crisis – Health and Care Delivery. N Engl J Med

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¹³ Pillay D G, Dodd B, Cartwright A, Borchers Arriagada N, Jones P, Cowie C, Norman R, and Johnston F H. 2023. Safer Air, Healthier Communities: Ten reasons for investment in Australia. Centre for Safe Air. <https://safeair.org.au/safer-air-healthier-communities/>

¹⁴ Patrick R, Hensher M, Suphioglu C, Huxley R. 2023. Asthma—The canary in the Australian coalmine: Making the links between climate change, fossil fuel and public health outcomes. Health Promot J Austral. DOI: 10.1002/hpja.756

¹⁵ Pillay et al. 2023.

¹⁶ United Nations. 1989. Article 24. Convention on the Rights of the Child. Available online: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>