

Asthma and Allergy Frequently Asked Questions

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Q 1: How common is allergy and asthma?

Allergy is very common in Australia and New Zealand, affecting around 20% of people. Asthma is also common, affecting around 10% of people. The number of people who are diagnosed with allergy and/or asthma is increasing in developed countries such as Australia and New Zealand.

Allergy plays an important role in asthma, associated with the cause and persistence of asthma symptoms. Around 80% of people with asthma have positive allergy test results.

Q 2: What is allergy?

Allergy occurs when a person reacts to substances in the environment that do not cause problems for most people. These substances are known as allergens and are commonly found in dust mites, pets, pollen, insects, ticks, moulds, foods and some medications. When a person who is allergic to a particular allergen comes into contact with it, an allergic reaction occurs which can lead to:

- Allergic rhinitis (hay fever) which affects the nose and eyes.
- Anaphylaxis (severe allergic reaction) which can affect the whole body.
- Allergic asthma which affects the lungs.
- Eczema or urticaria (hives) which affect the skin.

Q 3: What is asthma?

Asthma is a medical condition that affects a person's ability to breathe. People with asthma experience a narrowing of the airways in the lungs, making it harder to breathe in and out. People with asthma often have at least one of the following symptoms:

- Wheezing, which is a high-pitched sound coming from the chest, usually while breathing out.
- Persistent, irritable coughing, especially at night.
- A feeling of not being able to get enough air or being short of breath.
- Tightness and heaviness in the chest.
- Wheezing or coughing with exercise (exercise-induced bronchoconstriction).

Asthma symptoms can be triggered by allergens, infections, exercise, cold air, changes in temperature and cigarette smoke. Asthma symptoms may also be due to other causes, so it is important to always seek advice from a doctor if you have asthma.

Regular medication to prevent narrowing of the airways can make it possible for people with asthma to lead normal, active lives.

Q 4: How are allergy and asthma related?

Allergy plays an important role in asthma in two ways:

- Allergic conditions (such as allergic rhinitis) can cause swelling and excess mucus production in the airways making asthma symptoms worse.
- Exposure to allergens can directly trigger severe shortness of breath, tightness in the chest, coughing or wheezing. This is also known as an asthma attack, flare-up or exacerbation.

Asthma symptoms such as tightness in the chest and wheezing can sometimes occur at the same time as allergic rhinitis symptoms. People with moderate or severe allergic rhinitis can sometimes feel as if their allergic rhinitis has 'turned into' asthma.

Allergy testing is the best way to find out if your asthma is related to allergy. After reviewing your medical history, your doctor may perform skin prick tests and/or blood tests for antibodies to certain allergens. Your doctor may refer you to a clinical immunology/allergy specialist, especially if you have suspected allergies to foods, medicines or insects.

Q 5: Can pollen trigger asthma?

Pollen can directly trigger asthma and allergic rhinitis. Small particles of pollen allergens can penetrate deep into the lungs. This can be made worse during a thunderstorm known as "thunderstorm asthma". It is important for people who wheeze mostly during spring and/or summer to speak to their doctor about thunderstorm asthma.

Q 6: What allergy treatments are available to help control asthma?

If allergy has been shown to be causing your asthma, allergy testing will help identify the allergens that are triggering your symptoms. Taking steps to avoid or minimise your exposure to these allergy triggers can give you better control of your asthma symptoms.

Having untreated allergic rhinitis can make it more difficult to control asthma symptoms. Treatment options for allergic rhinitis include:

- **Intranasal corticosteroid sprays** are used each day and are the most effective long-term medications for allergic rhinitis. These sprays are effective at preventing symptoms from occurring. They can reduce the need for reliever asthma medications in people with asthma related to allergy.
- **Non-sedating antihistamines** can help treat allergic rhinitis symptoms and are safe for people with asthma.
- **Combination nasal sprays** containing an antihistamine and corticosteroid have the combined advantages of both medications.
- **Allergen immunotherapy** is a long-term treatment which changes the immune system's response to allergens. It has been shown to improve asthma control in some people. People are given gradually increasing amounts of allergen extracts which are usually injected or given under the tongue (sublingual).

Q 7: Should people with asthma and allergic rhinitis have any written plans?

If you have both asthma and allergic rhinitis, you may need two written plans from your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

An **Asthma Action Plan** provides information about:

- How to look after your asthma daily
- What to do if your asthma starts to flare up

- What to do if your asthma flare-up is severe
- What to do in an asthma emergency

An **ASCIA Treatment Plan for Allergic Rhinitis (Hay Fever)** provides information about:

- Allergen minimisation
- Thunderstorm asthma
- Medications
- Allergen immunotherapy

If you have asthma and are at risk of anaphylaxis, it is important to always carry an adrenaline (epinephrine) device with an up-to-date **ASCIA Action Plan for Anaphylaxis**.

Q 8: Are there any medications that should be avoided in people with asthma?

There are some medications that may cause problems for people with asthma. These include aspirin, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (such as ibuprofen) and beta blockers. Some complementary and alternative medicines such as echinacea and royal jelly can cause anaphylaxis in some people with asthma.

Tell your doctor and pharmacist that you have asthma before taking any new medications, including natural or herbal products. Make sure your doctor and pharmacist know about all the medications you are taking.

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