



Adult Onset Asthma

This information sheet is designed to inform adults about the trigger factors, occurrence and treatment of adult onset asthma.

What is adult onset asthma?

Adult onset asthma refers to the onset of asthma in an adult for the first time. The common signs and symptoms of asthma include:

- Varying degrees of breathlessness
- Wheeze (a whistling sound in the chest)
- Cough
- Chest tightness

What causes adult onset asthma?

The real cause of asthma (childhood or adult onset) remains uncertain. We do not understand why symptoms develop at a certain age, or why they might disappear.

Can asthma in adults be due to a recurrence of childhood illness?

Yes adult onset asthma can be a recurrence of childhood asthma that disappeared for many years. In some cases childhood asthma persists throughout adult life and others may be diagnosed with asthma for the first time as an adult. Sometimes childhood symptoms may not have been diagnosed as asthma; but have been called recurrent bronchitis or wheezy bronchitis.

Is adult onset asthma due to smoking?

Smoking can be a significant trigger factor for some people with asthma. Smoking can cause other lung diseases including chronic bronchitis and emphysema (these conditions are also classified as Chronic Obstructive Airway Disease). Common symptoms of these conditions include, breathlessness, cough and sometimes wheeze. As these symptoms are similar to asthma symptoms, doctors may find it difficult in certain cases to immediately distinguish the differences between someone who has a smoking related illness, or adult onset asthma in a person who smokes. If the symptoms can be relieved with asthma medication, this usually indicates it is asthma rather than Chronic Obstructive Airway Disease.

Could it be something else?

Sometimes other illnesses seen in adults can be hard to differentiate from adult onset asthma. Certain forms of heart disease associated with fluid retention, difficulty in breathing and wheezing may seem like adult onset asthma. If you have any of these symptoms you should ask your doctor for advice.

Will it ever go away?

In contrast to childhood asthma, adult onset asthma is more commonly persistent and permanent. Medications are often needed continuously to help keep adult onset asthma under control. One of the difficulties in adult life is that lung function tends to diminish after middle age. Certain conditions such as smoking-related diseases or asthma may be associated with a faster rate of deterioration of lung function. If asthma is under-treated in adult life, there is a risk that lung function may deteriorate more quickly and never recover. In some cases it is best to use regular medication in order to protect lung function all the time, rather than risk permanent deterioration.

Is the treatment different to childhood asthma?

The main principles are similar. The key issue is to **maintain best lung function at all times**. Because adult onset asthma often causes persistent symptoms, preventative medication is more commonly prescribed. Talk to your doctor to fully understand

Should I have a flue shot if I have asthma?

It is advisable for people with moderate to severe asthma to have a flu immunisation annually. It is also advisable for people with chronic respiratory conditions to have pneumococcal vaccination every 5 years to reduce the risk of influenza-pneumonia.
how you can do this.

Can certain workplaces give you asthma?

Many substances found in varying workplaces may cause asthma symptoms to develop in some adults. These substances are called sensitisers. These substances may sensitise the airways of a person who previously did not have asthma. If the airways become sensitive to any of these substances, the person may then develop asthma (See Asthma in the Workplace Brochure).

Asthma Information Sheets are also available on dust mites, allergy, medications and asthma and occupational asthma.

**For further information contact your local doctor
or call Asthma Victoria on 1800 645 130 or visit Asthma Victoria's website:
www.asthma.org.au**

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