

INFORMATION SHEET

Asthma, allergens and other triggers

People with asthma are sensitive to different triggers in their environment. Triggers cause inflammation (swelling and redness) in your airways and make your asthma worse.

Atopy is the genetic tendency to develop allergic diseases. Most people with asthma are atopic and have a general tendency to develop allergic diseases such as hay fever, eczema and anaphylaxis. If you are atopic, allergens may be important trigger factors that can worsen your asthma.

When a person with allergic asthma is exposed to allergens, their asthma gets worse. Depending on the allergen and where it enters the body, they may experience different symptoms. Other allergic reactions may include:

- **Allergic Rhinitis (or hay fever)** – sneezing, blocked and runny nose, itchy eyes and throat
- **Eczema** – dry, red, itchy skin
- **Hives** – skin rashes
- **Anaphylaxis** – severe form of generalised allergic reaction that is potentially life-threatening

Identifying your triggers

Asthma is often initially recognised by people when symptoms get worse in response to particular allergens or other triggers. It is very common for people with asthma to have different triggers to the next person. Managing your asthma includes identifying which triggers make your symptoms worse and avoiding and minimising exposure to these triggers as best as practically possible. It is handy to keep a diary of the times and situations when your asthma is worse to help identify triggers.

Types of triggers

There are two types of triggers: allergic (allergens) and non-allergic.

Allergens

Allergens are any substance that can bring on an allergic reaction. An allergic reaction occurs when your immune system reacts to substances in the environment that are harmless to other people. If you are allergic to something, then eating it, inhaling it or touching it can bring on an allergic reaction.

Many allergens are carried in dust. Minute particles of dust float around in the air you breathe. Depending on the environment you are in (such as city or country, home or work) and the time of year (such as spring), these dust particles can contain allergens such as:

- House dust mite droppings
- Insect debris
- Pollens
- Skin, scales, fur particles (dander) from animals
- Food dust
- Moulds

Other types of triggers

It's not just allergens that can trigger asthma symptoms. Other common triggers include:

- Respiratory viruses (common cold)
- Some medications
- Cigarette smoke
- Perfumes
- Chemicals
- Cold, dry air
- Exercise and physical activity
- Wood fire smoke
- Paint
- Gases

One of the most common triggers for asthma attacks is exercise and physical activity. This is definitely one trigger not to avoid, as exercise is an essential part of a healthy lifestyle. There are techniques to avoid exercise-induced asthma (see Staying Active with Asthma information sheet).

Allergen testing

Allergy testing can help to pinpoint your allergens. The doctor puts small dabs of different allergen solutions, such as pollen extract, along your arm. Then the doctor slightly pricks the skin underneath with a needle. If the skin swells or develops a welt, you are allergic to that substance. Blood tests are also available.

These skin and blood tests are not conclusive in determining asthma triggers. Just because your skin and blood reacts to the allergen, doesn't mean your lungs will too. Think of these tests as a helpful starting point.

Things to remember

- Managing your asthma includes avoiding exposure to your known allergens and other triggers.
- It is handy to keep a diary of your asthma symptoms throughout the year to help identify your triggers.

Where to get help

- Your doctor or pharmacist.
- Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy (ASCIA) **W:** www.allergy.org.au
- Anaphylaxis Australia **W:** www.allergyfacts.org.au.
- The Asthma Foundation of Victoria:
T: (03) 9326 7088 **E:** advice@asthma.org.au **W:** www.asthma.org.au

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