

ASTHMA - Triggers



Flu, Headcolds etc



Fumes



INFLAMED AIRWAYS



Dust Mites



Exercise



Fog, Damp



ASTHMA
SOCIETY
OF IRELAND

TRIGGERS IN ASTHMA

Most people can think of several things that make their asthma worse.

These we call triggers.

Find out what triggers your asthma so that you can:

- ❖ Try and avoid the triggers, or,
- ❖ Take extra treatment before or at the time of contact with the triggers.

Triggers usually show themselves straight away but sometimes develop over 4 – 6 hours or longer. A peak flow meter or a record of symptoms can help you discover your triggers.

The most common triggers are:

Colds and flu	Cigarette smoking	Exercise and activity
Allergies	Weather changes	Fumes
Occupations	Emotions	Medicines

Often it's not just one trigger that sets off an episode of asthma but a mixture of several triggers at about the same time.

Colds and Flu

Colds, flu, along with throat and nose infections, can bring on asthma episodes. The first signs are usually a blocked or runny nose or a sore throat.

You cannot stop yourself catching these infections so deal with them as soon as they appear.

WHAT TO DO

If you know that a cold usually triggers your asthma –

- ❖ As soon as the first snuffle or blocked nose appears increase the dose of your medicine/inhalers as the doctor has told you.

- ❖ Use your peak flow meter or record your symptoms to check your progress.
- ❖ See your doctor if your asthma gets worse.

Cigarette smoking

At least 70% of people with asthma become wheezy in a smoky room. It has been shown that children with asthma whose parents smoke have more asthma episodes than children whose parents don't smoke. Smoking marijuana is also harmful to the lungs.

WHAT TO DO:

- ❖ If you smoke, give up. It isn't always easy but there are groups around to help. Check with your Citizens Advice Bureau, the Asthma Society or Cancer Society for information. Remember that each cigarette you smoke is damaging your breathing tubes. Smoking may make your asthma more difficult to control and there is a very real risk of developing chronic bronchitis and emphysema.
- ❖ If friends or family smoke, explain how it affects your asthma and encourage them to either give up or smoke elsewhere.
- ❖ If you are out and people are smoking, try to sit in a smoke free area or near an open window.

Exercise/Activity

Wheezing, tightness of the chest or coughing during or after exercise or activity shows that this is a trigger of your asthma. However, it's better to control your asthma than to avoid exercise.

WHAT TO DO:

- ❖ Take your reliever medicine a few minutes before exercise or strenuous activity.
- ❖ Make sure you do warm-up exercises, for example some stretching exercises followed by running or skipping on the spot to build up fitness.

- ❖ If you get wheezy when you exercise stop, rest, and take extra reliever medicine. Make sure you have recovered before you start exercising again.

Allergies

Some people are particularly sensitive to certain things they come into contact with every day. These are "allergies" and they are important in hay fever and eczema as well as asthma. Hay fever causes itching, a runny nose and sneezing. Eczema causes redness and itching of the skin.

The most common causes of allergies are:

- ❖ House dust mites
- ❖ Animals
- ❖ Pollens, Moulds, Fungal spores
- ❖ Certain food and drinks

House dust mites

House dust mites are too tiny to see. They eat the flakes of skin we constantly shed. We all have them and it does not mean that our homes are dirty. They are present in furniture and carpets and especially in our beds. We breathe in their waste products and it is these that our breathing tubes are allergic to. As we spend a lot of time in bed, this is a favourite place of the house dust mite to live. Allergy to them is very common. Signs of allergy to dust mites include wheezing when you are vacuuming or dusting; when you enter a dusty room or house; asthma symptoms during the night or first thing in the morning.

WHAT TO DO:

- ❖ Direct sunlight kills the dust mite so put bedding in the sun every few weeks, preferably on the clothes line
- ❖ When washing sheets or other bedding use hot water if possible as this also kills dust mites

- ❖ Sheepskins used as undercovers are not recommended unless they can be frequently aired in the sun and washed
- ❖ Beds need to be kept dry, especially cots and cribs
- ❖ Ensure rooms are well vacuumed, damp-dusted and aired each week. Where possible keep dusty objects out of the bedroom
- ❖ No carpet is preferable or removable carpet that can be frequently aired in sunshine
- ❖ Covers can be purchased both for mattresses and pillows that act as a barrier to the house dust mite
- ❖ Special sprays to reduce house dust mite numbers are currently being tested
- ❖ Wash soft toys regularly in warm water or freeze them overnight.

Animals

Cats are the second major source of indoor allergen. A high proportion of Irish families keep cats and the allergens they produce tend to stay in the house for long periods. They are not a good choice of pet for families who have members with allergies. Other pets do not seem to produce such potent allergens, but dogs, rabbits, guinea pigs and mice can cause problems in some people.

WHAT TO DO:

- ❖ Never allow pets into the bedroom and if possible, keep them outside.
- ❖ If you are to visit friends or family who have furry animals take extra medication beforehand, or ask them to visit you. People will understand if you explain why.

Pollens, Moulds and Fungal Spores

Pollens can come from grasses, trees and shrubs. Privet has received publicity as a trigger for asthma but not everyone with asthma is sensitive to it. Grasses and weeds are so widespread and have such a long season that they are the major pollen problem in Ireland. Most grasses and weeds have two to six month seasons.

WHAT TO DO:

- ❖ Replace any tree or shrub in your garden that makes your nose and eyes itch or makes you sneeze and wheeze. Wind pollinated plants should be avoided – they have light pollen that travels easily.
- ❖ Take extra medicine during the months when you know pollens are likely to make your asthma worse. If you also get hayfever, medicines for this may be needed too.
- ❖ Keep the house as warm and dry as possible to avoid moulds.
- ❖ Remove mould or mildew from walls, shower curtains etc. with a fungicide e.g. very diluted household bleach.
- ❖ Air clothes and wardrobes regularly.
- ❖ Avoid contact with spores from rotting vegetation e.g. compost, leafmould.
- ❖ Mowing the lawn may disturb pollen and spores.
- ❖ If you are investigating air conditioning for your house, try before you buy, it can be expensive and not all types are suitable.
- ❖ Filters need to be effective against the extremely small pollen and fungal spores. (The type of filter required is a HEPA. This is a type not a brand name.)

Food and Drink

The foods most commonly associated with food allergy are cows milk, wheat, seafood, eggs, soybeans and peanuts. These can also cause your face, tongue and mouth to swell. Milk allergy affecting asthma occurs in probably one out of 50 children under the age of two. In older children and adults it is less frequent, about one in 500 people. Often it is not the food or drink as much as the substances or additives in them e.g. preservatives and colouring.

WHAT TO DO:

- ❖ If you have an immediate reaction to a certain food, avoid it in future.
- ❖ Check labels on all tinned and packaged food to make sure they are free from the substances you are allergic to.
- ❖ If you want to try an additive-free diet, contact your local Asthma Society for a list of commonly used additives.
- ❖ If you wish to take something out of your child's diet, discuss it first with your doctor as it may be important and necessary for healthy growth.
- ❖ Some people with asthma are very intolerant of foods containing salicylates, which is the main chemical in aspirin. Several fruits, especially kiwifruit, contain salicylates.

List of common irritants

Metabisulphite

(Additive numbers:
220, 223, 224.)

Monosodium glutamate (MSG)
(Additive number 621)

Tartazine – yellow,
orange colouring
(Additive number 102)

Found in:

Soft drinks, cordials, fruit juices, and wine.

Some dried fruit and fruit bars, pickles,
pickled onions, potato chips, sausages and
sausage meat.

Chinese, Japanese and Asian food.
Savoury snacks such as crisps.
Soya sauce. Commercially prepared
Savoury food e.g. soups, seasonings and sauces.

Fruit juice, cordial. sweets, desserts,
toppings, syrups, sauces and pickles.

Weather

Often changes of weather (rather than a particular temperature) can trigger asthma. The arrival of spring and autumn seem to be trigger times. Asthma can be troublesome in winter but more usually because of colds and flu rather than the season itself.

WHAT TO DO:

- ❖ Try to keep your home at an even temperature.
- ❖ It may help to use a thermostatically-controlled heater turned down low in the bedroom at night.
- ❖ If you know that certain weather affects your asthma you may need to increase your medicine during that time.

Fumes

Triggers in the air include not only factory smoke and car exhaust fumes but also cigarette smoke, fly sprays, strong perfumes and aerosol cleaning sprays. Some building materials and home furnishings may give off fumes that might make asthma worse. Formaldehyde in particleboard is one of these.

WHAT TO DO:

- ❖ Try to find what the trigger is.
- ❖ If exhaust fumes are a problem, carry a reliever inhaler in your car.
- ❖ Seal particleboard floors, shelves, stairs and household fittings with polyurethane or an oil-based paint.
- ❖ See your home is well-ventilated so fumes do not accumulate.

Occupations

Occupational asthma can mean working with substances:

- ❖ That actually cause you to develop asthma (when you didn't have it before)
- ❖ That makes your asthma worse.

Jobs and substances which may cause asthma

Some of the most common Ireland causes are:

List of substances

Found in

Isocyanate paints, foams and plastics.

Car and furniture painters using two-pot paints, foam and plastic manufacturers.

Animal fur and proteins.

Laboratory workers, veterinary workers etc.

Flour and grain dusts.

Farmers, grain workers and bakers.

Epoxy resins and other plastics.

Boat builders, mould manufacturers and plastic manufacturing processors.

WHAT TO DO:

- ❖ Identify the cause and take advice on control measures, especially adequate ventilation.
- ❖ The Occupational Safety and Health Service of the Department of Labour will be able to help.

Substances that can make your present asthma worse (triggers)

- ❖ Cigarette smoke.
- ❖ Fumes from petrol, household sprays, solvents, paint, formalin.
- ❖ Formaldehyde urea (in particleboard), Ammonia, Chlorine, Sulphur dioxide gas, Perfume/scented soaps, Dusts.

Clues that something at work is making your asthma worse:

- ❖ Your asthma gets worse soon after starting a new job or while you are doing a particular part of your job.

- ❖ Your asthma improves when you are not at work e.g. on holiday or at the weekend.

WHAT TO DO:

- ❖ Before starting a job, consider whether it involves anything that may make your asthma worse.
- ❖ Avoid any triggers that you can identify. You may need to talk to your boss and see what can be done about avoiding them or contact the Occupational Safety and Health Service. Your doctor will be able to help you with this.
- ❖ Ask if you can change to a different area of your work and see if this makes a difference.
- ❖ If the triggers can't be avoided, discuss with your doctor which medication you can increase. However, if you continue to be exposed to a trigger, then even with increasing medication your asthma is likely to worsen over time.
- ❖ As a final solution, you may have to change your job.

Emotions

At times people become worried, up-tight or stressed as well as being excited or happy. What is of concern for people with asthma are the extremes of these emotions, or when one upsetting emotion is long-term. The part your emotions play in your asthma can be difficult to pinpoint. If you are aware that your feelings aren't well-balanced and may be making your asthma worse there are skilled people to help you. Your doctor may be able to assist or refer you on to someone else with these skills.

Medicines

There are two common groups of medicines, which can trigger asthma. These are:

- ❖ Beta – blockers.

- ❖ Aspirin and pain – relieving tablets, especially those taken for arthritis.

Beta-blockers

These are used (in tablet form) to treat a number of illnesses – including high blood pressure, heart conditions (heart pain – angina), migraines, as well as in eye drops for glaucoma. If you are discussing any of these conditions with your doctor remember to tell him or her that you also have asthma.

Aspirin and pain relief

One in twenty people with asthma are sensitive to aspirin and other medicines for pain relief. If aspirin upsets you, make sure when you buy any pain relief tablets that you read the packet carefully. Remember that no children under the age of 12 should be given any aspirin.

Summary

Every person with asthma has different triggers. Identifying them is not always easy but it is well worthwhile trying. Using a peak flow meter or recording symptoms when your asthma gets worse will help you find out your triggers. Pay particular attention to your triggers when your asthma is troublesome, as you will react more to them at this time. Make a list of your possible triggers and take this list next time you visit your doctor and discuss all that can be done to avoid or deal with them.

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For further information on asthma visit our Website at:
www.asthmasociety.ie

Or phone our Asthma Line at 1850 44 54 64 for 24 hour pre – recorded information.

Or phone our Asthma Liveline to speak to an Asthma Nurse Specialist on 01 8788122. Monday and Friday: 9.30 – 1.00 and Thursday: 9.30 – 5.30. (Times may vary – please contact our office – *see contact details below* – if you experience any difficulty.)

The Asthma Society is primarily an information service which aims to enhance and augment the information provided by your GP, asthma nurse and chemist.



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