



# Adult onset asthma

Asthma isn't just a childhood condition. Many people are surprised to learn that asthma can develop for the first time in adulthood.

## Common symptoms include:

- Shortness of breath
- Wheezing (a whistling sound in the chest)
- Coughing (sometimes with phlegm)
- Tightness or pressure in the chest

## What causes adult onset asthma?

The exact cause of asthma is not fully understood. We don't always know why symptoms start at a certain age or why they may disappear or return.

What is known is that asthma involves the inflammation and narrowing of the airways which makes breathing difficult. Preventer or controller medications work by reducing this inflammation to help prevent flare-ups and maintain lung health.

## Can childhood asthma return in adulthood?

Yes. Childhood asthma may:

- Continue into adulthood or
- Settle for many years before returning later in life

Some adults may have asthma-like symptoms as children that were never formally diagnosed and may have been labelled as "recurrent bronchitis" or "wheezy bronchitis".

Asthma can also develop for the first time in adulthood. Risk factors may include:

- Family history of asthma
- Allergies
- Obesity
- Hormonal changes during pregnancy or menopause
- Exposure to irritants, including in the workplace.



## Smoking, vaping and adult asthma

Smoking and vaping (e-cigarettes) irritate the lungs and can:

- Trigger asthma symptoms
- Make asthma harder to control
- Reduce the effectiveness of asthma medications
- Increase the risk of severe flare-ups

For more information, see the resource '*Asthma, Smoking and Vaping*'.

## Other trigger factors

Adult onset asthma can be worsened by triggers. Identifying and managing triggers is an important part of asthma management.

Common triggers include:

- **Dust:** Workplace or household dust can irritate the airways. Some jobs, such as baking, woodworking, metalwork, mining or construction may require steps to reduce risk exposure.
- **Allergens:** Pets, feather bedding, mould and dust mites can trigger asthma and allergies. Reducing exposure at home and work may help.

- **Fumes and strong odours:**

Spray paints, household chemicals and fumes from kerosene or unflued gas heaters can trigger asthma symptoms.

- **Infections:** Viruses such as cold, flu, pneumonia commonly trigger asthma. Vaccination can reduce the risk of severe illness, but good asthma control and following your Asthma Action Plan remains essential.

- **Medications:** Some beta-blockers and NSAIDs (like aspirin and certain pain relievers) can worsen asthma. Always check with your doctor before starting any new medication.

- **Foods:** Occasionally adults may be sensitive to foods such as nuts, seafood or foods containing sulphites or MSG. Eating dairy products won't cause asthma.

- Some forms of heart disease which may cause breathlessness or wheezing can also mimic asthma symptoms.

A doctor can assess your symptoms and medical history and may refer you for lung function testing.

Respiratory Care WA provides lung function testing to help understand how your lungs are working and how well they respond to treatment.

## Managing asthma

There is no cure for asthma, but with the right treatment, information and support, people can live active, healthy lives.

Keys steps to managing asthma can be found on the next page.

## Asthma, COPD or something else?

Other conditions can cause symptoms similar to asthma, including:

- Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), which includes chronic bronchitis and emphysema.



### Keys steps to managing asthma:

- **Stay active** – Regular physical activity is important for overall health.
- **Use preventer medication as prescribed** – Usually inhaled corticosteroids taken daily to reduce airway inflammation and help maintain lung function.
- **Carry your reliever medications** – Such as Salbutamol for quick relief symptoms
- **Follow your Asthma Action Plan** – One of the most effective ways to prevent flare-ups and reduce hospital visits.
- **Have regular reviews** – Your GP or healthcare team can check your symptoms, inhaler technique and treatment
- **Quit smoking/vaping** – Support is available to help you quit.
- **Get your annual influenza vaccination** – Free for all Australians over 6 months with asthma.

### Sources:

1. Healthline. *Can You Develop Asthma as an Adult (Adult-Onset Asthma)?* 2026.
2. Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America – New England Chapter. *Adult Onset Asthma.* 2026.
3. Cleveland Clinic. *Can You Develop Asthma as an Adult?* 2025.

## How we can help

Respiratory Care WA has a team of respiratory healthcare professionals here to provide information and support for Western Australians living with asthma and COPD. We offer in-person education and support at our respiratory hubs or via telehealth. Our team can also visit schools, workplaces or community and sporting groups to deliver free asthma management sessions.

Email [ask@respiratorycarewa.org.au](mailto:ask@respiratorycarewa.org.au) to find out more.