



# Pain relief and asthma: Aspirin and NSAIDs

Some people with asthma are sensitive to aspirin and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs).

Taking these medicines may trigger asthma symptoms such as wheezing, coughing, chest tightness or difficulty breathing. In some cases, reactions can be severe or life-threatening.

This sensitivity is known as aspirin-exacerbated respiratory disease (AERD). It affects:

- Around 7% of people with asthma
- Up to 15% of people with severe asthma
- About 30% of people with asthma who have nasal polyps

AERD is more common in adults than in children. Reactions can occur within minutes to a few hours and may include severe breathing difficulty, swelling of the face or lips (angioedema) or serious allergic-type reactions.

## What products might affect asthma?

**Aspirin** (also known as acetylsalicylic acid) - Widely available for pain, fever and inflammation. Safe for most people,

but some with asthma may have severe reactions.

**Salicylates** - Chemically related to aspirin and can cause similar reactions in sensitive individuals. They are found in some teething gels and topical products, particularly those used for young children.

**Other NSAIDs** - Several NSAIDs are available from pharmacies without a prescription. These medicines are commonly used for pain relief, including period pain.

Examples include:

- Ibuprofen
- Mefenamic acid
- Naproxen or Naproxen sodium
- Celecoxib (prescription only)



### What should I do if I'm affected?

- Follow your Asthma Action Plan immediately
- Take your reliever medication (e.g. Ventolin®, Asmol®, Airomir® or Bricanyl®)
- Call an ambulance (000) if symptoms are severe or do not improve

### What can I do to avoid problems?

- Follow the advice of your doctor or healthcare team
- Avoid aspirin or NSAIDs if you have AERD, or if previous use caused, runny nose, wheezing, or shortness of breath within 1–3 hours of taking them
- Use paracetamol-based products for pain relief

- Check cold and flu medicines carefully, as some products contain aspirin
- Have a written Asthma Action Plan and follow it
- Ensure children with asthma do not to take aspirin
- Always read labels and leaflets on medicines from pharmacies, supermarkets and health food stores
- Tell healthcare professionals, pharmacists and other providers that you have asthma before taking new medicines

If asthma symptoms worsen see your doctor so the reaction can be assessed and reported.

In an emergency, follow your Asthma Action Plan and call 000.

### Sources:

1. National Asthma Council Australia. Australian Asthma Handbook. *Asthma Triggers*. 2026.
2. National Asthma Council Australia. Health Professionals. *Asthma FAQs*. 2017.
3. Alpha Allergy & Asthma Associates. *AERD Treatment, Aspirin Desensitization*. 2020.

## 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 groups to deliver free asthma management sessions. Email [ask@respiratorycarewa.org.au](mailto:ask@respiratorycarewa.org.au) to find out more.