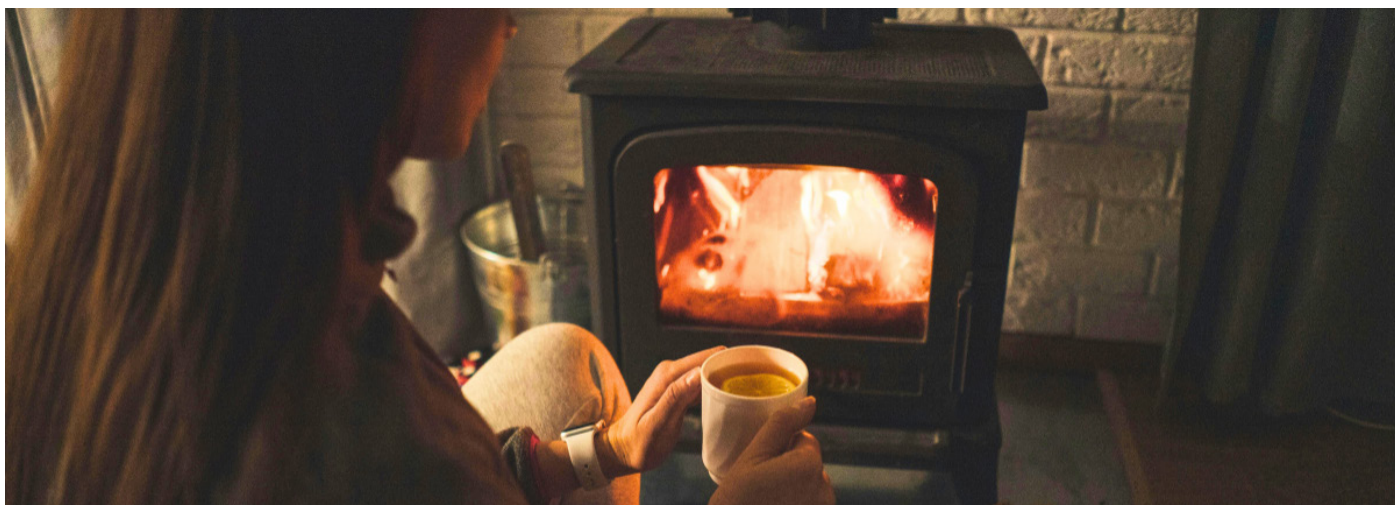




Wood smoke and asthma

Wood heaters are a common way to keep warm during the cooler months.

However, smoke can worsen asthma symptoms and affect air quality both inside and outside the home.

About wood smoke

Wood smoke can travel from the chimneys and affect surrounding homes and neighbourhoods. It contains a mix of harmful gases and particles, including:

- Coarse and fine particles
- Carbon monoxide
- Nitrogen oxides
- Sulphur dioxide
- Volatile organic compounds (VOCs)

Health effects of wood smoke

Breathing in wood smoke can irritate the airways and trigger symptoms such as:

- Coughing
- Wheezing
- Shortness of breath

Short-term exposure (hours or days) may:

- Irritate the eyes, nose and throat
- Cause headaches and fatigue
- Reduce lung function
- Worsen asthma and other lung conditions

Long-term exposure (over many years) may increase the risk of heart and lung disease.

Research from the Centre for Safe Air estimates that wood smoke contributes to between 558 and 1,555 early deaths in Australia each year.

Who is most at risk

Wood smoke can affect anyone, but those more vulnerable include:

- Older adults
- Infants and young children
- Pregnant women
- People who smoke or have smoked
- People with asthma or other health conditions



Reducing your exposure

If wood smoke triggers your asthma, the following may help:

- Monitor local air quality e.g. using the RAC Air Health Monitor
- Stay indoors with windows and doors closed when smoke levels are high
- Avoid outdoor activity when you can smell smoke
- Wear a P2 or N95 mask if you need to go outside
- Take your preventer inhaler as prescribed
- Keep your reliever inhaler nearby
- Visit your doctor for a review before autumn or winter
- Use only dry, well-seasoned wood (moisture content of 20% or less).
- Do not burn rubbish or treated or painted wood
- Store wood under cover and off the ground to keep it dry
- Start small fires with good airflow
- Add larger logs once hot coals have formed
- Avoid slow, smouldering fires
- Do not overload the heater or leave it on a low for long periods
- Do not leave a fire smouldering overnight
- Check your chimney, visible smoke should be minimal after lighting
- Ensure your heater and chimney meet local standards
- Allow some ventilation for safe burning

Follow your Asthma Action Plan if symptoms worsen. Call an ambulance (000) if there is no improvement.

If you use a wood heater

Using your wood heater correctly can help reduce smoke and improve air quality:

Cleaner heating options

Where possible, consider lower-emission heating options such as reverse cycle air conditioning, flued gas or electric heaters.

The Centre for Safe Air estimates that reducing wood heater use across Australia could lead to significant health benefits of between \$AUD 1.61 billion to 1.93 billion annually.

Sources:

1. Centre for Safe Air. *Data visualisation: Wood heater pollution*. 2026.
2. Healthy WA. *Health effects of wood smoke*. 2026.
3. NSW Health. *Wood burning heaters and your health*. 2026.
4. Government of Western Australia. *BurnWise*. 2023.
5. Asthma Australia. *Smoke - Bushfires, woodfires and wood heaters*. 2026.

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 workplaces or community and sporting groups to deliver free asthma management sessions.

Email ask@respiratorycarewa.org.au to find out more.