

Adult onset asthma

Fact sheet prepared by the Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ

Adult onset asthma generally refers to the onset of asthma for the first time in an adult.

Can asthma in adults be due to a recurrence of childhood illness?

Yes. In some cases childhood asthma persists throughout adult life. In other cases childhood asthma may disappear for many years, but return as adult onset asthma. Sometimes childhood symptoms may not have been diagnosed as asthma; they may have been called recurrent bronchitis or wheezy bronchitis.

Is adult onset asthma due to smoking?

No. Tobacco smoking causes Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). COPD also causes breathlessness, cough and sometimes wheeze. Because of the similarity of symptoms doctors cannot always be sure whether someone who has smoked has a smoking related illness or adult onset asthma and may ask for a spirometry test to help determine the diagnosis. For further information on spirometry see the fact sheet "What is Spirometry?" or visit our website asthmaandrespiratory.org.nz.

What causes adult onset asthma?

The cause of asthma at any age remains uncertain. We do not understand why symptoms develop at a certain age, or why they might disappear.

What makes adult onset asthma worse?

Adult onset asthma can be made worse by trigger factors similar to those in childhood asthma. The first priority is to avoid trigger factors such as:

Tobacco smoke: your breathing difficulties are more likely to get worse sooner and permanently if you smoke or are exposed to environmental tobacco smoke (ETS).

Dusts: Dust can irritate the nose, throat and lungs. With asthma you are best to avoid dusty occupations such as baking, woodwork, metal foundry work, mining, etc.

Allergens: Some indoor allergen sources such as cats, mould on walls, or dust make asthma worse and should be avoided wherever possible. Other allergens such as house dust mites are more difficult to avoid. You should make every effort to keep your home and workplace as free of your asthma trigger factors as possible.

Fumes and strong odours: Fumes and strong odours can make asthma worse. If you find that some household cleaners trigger your asthma you should try to avoid this product and use an alternative. Industrial processes may be a cause of or trigger of asthma. Spray paint fumes from panel beating works, for instance, are a recognised asthma trigger.

Infections: Colds and upper respiratory tract infections are the infections that most commonly make asthma worse and cannot be easily prevented. Influenza however can be prevented and we strongly advise you to have an annual influenza vaccination. It must be remembered that an influenza vaccination will not prevent the ordinary cold.

Medications: Beta-blockers are used for treating high blood pressure and associated angina. They are also contained in some eye-drops used to treat glaucoma. You should not use these medicines if you have asthma – they can make it worse. Aspirin and pain relievers called ‘non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs’ (NSAIDs) can also make asthma worse. For more information on these medicines see the fact sheet “Asthma and other medicines”.

Foods: If you are sensitive to foods such as nuts or seafood and food additives (e.g. sulphites 220 - 228), used as preservatives in food and drinks, you should avoid these. Milk or dairy products rarely trigger asthma. For further information on triggers in asthma see the fact sheet “House Dust Mites,” the booklet “Triggers in Asthma” or visit asthmaandrespiratory.org.nz.

Could it be something else?

Sometimes other illnesses seen in adults may seem like adult onset asthma e.g. heart disease which causes fluid retention, breathing and wheezing. For this reason adult onset asthma can be difficult to diagnose.

Will it ever go away?

Adult onset asthma is usually persistent and permanent. Medications are usually needed continuously to help keep adult onset asthma under control.

Everybody's lung function decreases in middle age. However, if your asthma is under-treated there is a risk that your lung function may deteriorate quickly and may never recover. You should therefore use regular medication in order to protect your lung function, rather than risking permanent lung damage. Smoking is likely to cause a faster rate of deterioration of lung function.

Is the treatment different to childhood asthma?

The main principles are similar. The key issue is to maintain best lung function at all times. Because adult onset asthma often causes long-term symptoms, you will usually be prescribed preventive medication. This is to prevent permanent impairment of your lung function.

The Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ is a charitable organisation committed to those affected by asthma and other respiratory illness. We advocate to government, raise awareness, fund research, provide resources and educate health professionals.

Check out our comprehensive website at asthmaandrespiratory.org.nz.