

Asthma winter checklist

Cold and flu

The 'common cold' is a viral infection, caused by rhinovirus in more than two thirds of people.

Influenza or the 'flu' is also an infection caused by a virus however it may cause severe illness compared to the common cold.

Colds and flu can be a common trigger of asthma attacks. Up to 60 to 70% of asthma attacks are caused by viral infections.

RSV

Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) is a highly contagious respiratory virus that is common during the winter months in temperate climates, but infections can occur all year round.

RSV spreads easily through coughs and sneezes and may cause lower respiratory tract infections. It is often associated with young children, but also impacts people of all ages.

Adults over 60 years of age have higher rates of serious complications with RSV infection. People with asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) are at even greater risk.

Make sure your lungs are in the best possible shape for winter seasonal outbreaks by following these steps.

1. Get your lungs checked

See your doctor for an asthma review. You can check the health of your lungs and assess if you need to make any changes to your asthma medications and asthma action plan so you stay well over winter.

2. Follow your asthma action plan

Together with your doctor, develop or update your written asthma action plan with instructions on how to manage your asthma over winter. A written asthma action plan can help you recognise



worsening asthma symptoms and know what to do in response.

Acting quickly can help prevent a mild flare-up from developing into serious asthma symptoms.

3. Use your medications wisely

Tell your doctor if you have been using your reliever puffer more than twice a week or are having asthma symptoms at night. These are important signs that your asthma is not well controlled.

If you have been prescribed a preventer medication, make sure you use it - even if you feel well.

4. Check your inhaler technique

All adults and children need regular training from a doctor, nurse, respiratory educator or pharmacist to use inhaled medications correctly.

Correct use of inhalers helps medications work

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properly, can reduce the risk of side-effects and is essential for good asthma management.

The instructions are different for each type of inhaler device. Check the National Asthma Council's "How-to" video library for a range of instructional videos.

5. Take extra care if you are over 65

- Colds, flu and RSV can hit extra hard in seniors with asthma.
- Don't ignore symptoms or put off seeking help - prompt action can help keep you out of hospital.
- Make sure you're taking your medications correctly. Ask your pharmacist, nurse, GP or educator to check you're using your inhaler (puffer) correctly. Spacers are recommended for use with pressurised metered dose inhalers for both adults and children.
- If you're still using a nebuliser, speak to your doctor about making the switch to an inhaler (puffer) and spacer - this can work just as well for treating asthma symptoms (including during an asthma attack) and is easier, faster and cheaper to use than a nebuliser.

6. Take preventive action

- Keep warm if cold air triggers your asthma.
- Control germs by washing your hands.
- Avoid contact with anyone who's sick.
- Ask your doctor about having the flu and/or RSV vaccination.
- Annual flu vaccination is important to prevent influenza and its complications. It is recommended for all people 6 months of age and over.
- Special risk groups are eligible to receive the flu vaccine for free under the National Immunisation Program (NIP).
- An RSV vaccine was approved in January 2024 for use in Australia for people aged 60 years and over on private script.
- An injected antibody for infants (not a vaccine)

which protects against RSV for at least 5 months after a single dose, is available for free in New South Wales, Queensland, and Western Australia.

- Vaccinations are also recommended to minimise the impacts of other respiratory illnesses that can exacerbate asthma such as pneumonia, whooping cough and COVID-19.

If you get sick...

Follow your written asthma action plan. If you don't have one, contact your doctor to check what you should do.

- Get lots of rest and stay hydrated.
- Stay home - try to avoid infecting others.
- Seek medical help straight away if your symptoms are severe or rapidly getting worse.

Antibiotics are not recommended for treating viral infections like the common cold.

More information

- **National Asthma Council Australia**
'How-to videos': nationalasthma.org.au/health-professionals/how-to-videos
- **Department of Health:** health.vic.gov.au/immunisation/seasonal-influenza-vaccine
- **Lung Foundation Australia:** lungfoundation.com.au/lung-health/pneumonia-cold-flu/
- **Immunisation Foundation Australia:** ifa.org.au/resources/#resourcespostersflyers

Download asthma action plans



Browse our how-to video library



Disclaimer: It is important to note that information contained in this fact sheet is not intended to replace professional medical advice. Any questions regarding a medical diagnosis or treatment should be directed to a medical practitioner.