

Asthma



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What is asthma?

Asthma is the most common chronic disease of childhood. Many young people grow out of their asthma completely, while others will have occasional minor attacks. Sometimes a serious asthma attack will require admission to hospital; in extreme cases a severe attack can be fatal.

Asthma affects the airways of the lungs and causes difficulty in breathing. During an attack there is less room for the air to get through causing difficulty in breathing and some combination of coughing, wheezing, and chest tightness. Often this is most noticeable during the night or early morning.

Those with asthma find that their airways are easily irritated and so a 'trigger factor' such as pollen or fine dust can start off an attack.

Living with asthma

Some of those with asthma may know what triggers an attack for them, but it is quite likely that they will not, as such triggers can be very varied. A cold can increase the chances of an attack in some people; other triggers are allergic reactions to house dust mites, animal fur or pollen. Infections, cold air, fumes or exercise can also cause attacks. Occasionally medicines, food, or extremes of emotion can trigger an attack. The factsheet *FS250051: Allergies* contains more information about allergies.

Most of those with asthma will take some form of medication, either a relieving drug, which opens up the narrow airways, often taken using an inhaler, and/or a preventative drug, which helps to

reduce the irritability of the airways and the effect of the trigger factors.

Such medication will have been prescribed to be taken either when an attack starts, or at regular times of the day, or before taking exercise.

Individuals may find that particular Scouting activities may trigger an attack, or their doctor may have advised them against certain activities. This must be taken into account when planning such activities.

Practical Tips

If a particular activity causes a problem, try to plan around it and have an alternative available - without making a fuss.

The exercise, excitement and dust of the weekly meeting place can start an attack. Anyone with an inhaler should have it with them and Leaders should be aware of how it is used. If the inhaler has been forgotten and an attack happens create some space for recovery by moving others away and making them comfortable. Then contact the parents and take them home.

For camps, holidays and outings it is important to ensure that anyone with medication and/or an inhaler brings it with them.

You need to be aware that pollen, excitement, tiredness, exercise, a respiratory tract infection (common cold), sudden exposure to cold water (e.g. falling out of a canoe!) or homesickness could precipitate an attack.

Whilst away make sure that someone in the same tent or room knows that they must call for a Leader if anyone is taken ill in the night.

Discuss any special measures that need to be taken for expeditions with the young person concerned, and their parents if appropriate. If it seems necessary, seek medical advice. Ensure all other members of the expedition are properly briefed in case an emergency arises.

What else do I need to know?

An asthma attack must be treated seriously, if there is no medication to hand, or if the medication does not appear to have any effect - for example continuing laboured breathing; blueness of lips, tongue or finger tips; vomiting; fatigue or a very fast pulse - seek medical help.

Each individual with asthma will be different, some can manage their own medication successfully, others cannot. It is wise to check that the correct medication is available before starting an activity.

Leaders must recognise that for young people with asthma, control of their condition may become the subject of rebellion as part of their adolescent process. For a while individuals may become careless, even foolish over their activities or medication. This can cause additional problems and requires a good deal of understanding and discussion especially if adventurous activities are being contemplated.

If medication is administered, make sure you know the correct dosage. If special equipment is required be sure you know how to operate it correctly.

Try to keep calm if someone has an asthma attack, a crowd of spectators, fear, panic or excitement can make it worse.

Further Information

Discuss with the individual and/or their parents the extent to which help is needed and learn any practical tips that they have to offer. They might also be able to arrange for you to have a chat with the G.P. or specialist involved if it is felt to be helpful.

There is a large range of medication and devices for administering it. Ensure that the individual is fully acquainted with their individual devices and

how to use them. Some require storage in dry areas.

Useful Contacts

Asthma UK

Providence House
Providence Place
London
N1 0NT
Telephone: 020 7226 2260
Helpline: 08457 01 02 03 (Monday - Friday 9am - 5pm)
Fax: 020 7704 0740
Website: <http://www.asthma.org.uk>

Asthma UK Scotland

4 Queen Street
Edinburgh
EH2 1JE
Telephone: 0131 226 2544
Fax: 01 31 226 2401

British Lung Foundation

73-75 Goswell Road,
London
EC1V 7ER
Telephone: 020 7688 5555
Helpline: 08458 50 50 20 (Monday - Friday 10am - 6pm)
Fax: 020 7688 5556
Email: enquiries@blf-uk.org
Website: <http://www.lunguk.org/>