

No 3. Asthma Triggers

There are a wide range of triggers which can bring on asthma symptoms in some adults and children. Different triggers affect different people and some asthmatics have no obvious triggers for their symptoms. For those with triggers the severity of symptoms each trigger causes can vary from time to time. A single exposure to an asthma trigger can cause symptoms for up to 24 hours or longer. If you notice anything that makes your asthma worse you should tell your doctor or nurse. The most commonly recognized triggers are:-

- **Colds / flu / chest infections**

- **House dust mite**

House dust mites are so small they cannot be seen with the naked eye. They are present in all houses and can be found in large numbers even when a house is clean and tidy. The higher the numbers of house dust mites the more likely a susceptible person is to develop asthma symptoms. House dust mite numbers can be reduced by:-

- using barrier covers for mattresses, duvets and pillows
- washing duvet covers, sheets and pillow cases once a week at 60°C
- vacuuming frequently
- damp dusting
- using cotton or synthetic blankets instead of wool
- replacing carpets with linoleum, wood or tiles
- washing curtains every few months
- keeping rooms well aired (especially if your house is double-glazed)

Your nurse or doctor can give you more information about this.

- **Cigarette smoking**

Smoking causes asthma to become worse and reduces the effect of treatment. Smoky atmospheres have a similar effect and it is very important that those living in the same house as an asthmatic do not smoke. Whether childhood wheeze and chestiness is due to asthma or not it is always important to protect your child from tobacco smoke both in their own home and anywhere else they spend time. **Any smokers should ask their doctor or nurse for advice and help on stopping.**

- **Animals**

Half of all children with asthma have symptoms when in contact with cats or dogs. Bathing cats or dogs once a week and keeping them out of bedrooms and living rooms can help, but it can take some months for these actions to have any effect. Any furry, hairy or feathered animal can bring on asthma symptoms.

- **Exercise**

Exercise may bring on asthma symptoms especially on cold dry days or after a change in weather. If you regularly get exercise related asthma symptoms use your reliever medication 15 minutes before you start exercising and warm up gently. Remember exercise is good for everyone including people with asthma.

- **Pollens and moulds**

People with pollen related asthma often have hayfever symptoms at the same time (Runny/ stuffy nose, itchy/ watery eyes, itchy throat, sneezing). Different types of grass and plant pollens are released throughout the spring, summer and autumn. Some

people only react to specific pollens and may get symptoms for short periods at a specific time of year. Mould spores are more common in wet, damp weather.

- **Emotion**
Excitement, stress or upset can all make asthma worse.
- **Medication**
Especially Non Steroidal Anti-inflammatories (Available over the counter at a pharmacy as aspirin or ibuprofen / nurofen / brufen) and beta-blockers (Prescription only) which are often used in the treatment of angina or high blood pressure. These medications can be dangerous for some asthmatics. Always tell your pharmacist you have asthma if you are buying medication.
- **Hormones**
Some women find their asthma is worse before the start of their monthly period, when pregnant or during the menopause.
- **Work**
Exposure to certain agents at work can occasionally bring on asthma. This often gives symptoms which are worse during the working week and are better at weekends and during holidays.
- **Foods**
It is not common but foodstuffs such as nuts, fish, orange drinks, dairy produce and alcohol can occasionally bring on asthma symptoms.

Some people have no obvious triggers for their asthma but most people find that many different things can trigger symptoms. While it is wise to avoid triggers for your asthma if you can it is not always possible to avoid them all. In any case just avoiding your triggers is not likely to control your asthma by itself – you may need medication as well.

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