

What is asthma?

Asthma is a condition that occurs when the airways become inflamed and narrow, making it hard to breathe. It can cause episodes of wheezing, shortness of breath, chest tightness and coughing, particularly in the early morning and evening.

In Australia, asthma affects over two million people. In primary-school aged children, asthma is more common in boys than girls. In pre-school aged children and high-school aged children, there is no difference between boys and girls. In older age groups, it is more common in women. Understanding your asthma can help you prevent asthma attacks and enjoy life to the fullest.

What causes asthma?

There is no known cause for asthma, but there are certain 'triggers' that can set off an asthma attack or asthma symptoms. The major triggers for asthma are allergens such as house dust mites, pollens, mould spores and animal hair or fur, tobacco smoke, viral infections and weather changes. Exercise may also trigger asthma, but appropriate medication and warm-up exercises can usually control this.

Food is not a common trigger for asthma, although in a small number of people, food can trigger an asthma attack, from either a food allergy or chemical intolerance. Only 2.5% of all people with asthma are affected by food and drinks. Though a common belief, milk is rarely a trigger for asthma.

How can you avoid asthma triggers?

Your doctor can help you work out what triggers your asthma. It may be possible to avoid your own asthma triggers. Discuss any avoidance strategies with your doctor.

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Diet and asthma

Eating a well-balanced diet is recommended for all people with asthma. Your diet should include a variety of breads and cereals, fruits and vegetables, lean meats or meat alternatives, and dairy foods such as milk, cheese and yogurt. This will ensure you receive a range of nutrients such as protein, carbohydrate, fat, and vitamins and minerals for overall health and wellbeing.

Dairy foods and asthma

Dairy foods have often been suggested as a common trigger for asthma, but there is little scientific evidence to support this myth. In fact, research suggests that dairy may help protect children against becoming asthmatic. In a study of over 3,000 pre-school children, researchers found that children who ate dairy foods every day had significantly fewer asthma symptoms than children who didn't eat dairy foods every day. Similarly, in a study investigating food intake and asthma in adults, drinking milk was associated with a lower risk of asthma. These findings support earlier research showing that children who consumed more than three serves of milk every day were two-and-a-half times less likely to develop asthma than children with the lowest intake of milk.

Dairy foods and mucus

It is also a myth that dairy foods, particularly milk, cause mucus production. Some people may experience a thin, temporary coating over the mouth and throat after drinking milk, which is often mistaken for mucus. This sensation is simply related to the natural, creamy texture of milk and is unlikely to trigger any asthmatic symptoms. Non-dairy drinks of a similar thickness cause similar sensations.

Dairy foods for good nutrition

Dairy foods are a great source of bone-building nutrients, from calcium and phosphorus through to protein, all of which are particularly important for growing children and teens. Dairy foods are the primary source of calcium in the Australian diet.

Unless diagnosed with a specific allergy or intolerance to dairy foods by a medical practitioner, there is no reason to restrict or eliminate dairy from your diet. Unfortunately, due to the myths surrounding dairy and asthma, many people may be unnecessarily limiting or avoiding dairy foods. This can lead to fewer food choices, a reduced enjoyment of food and a nutritionally unbalanced diet.

Asthma

Furthermore, removing dairy from children's diets has been associated with smaller skeletons and an increased risk of bone breaks. Nutritional status may also be compromised due to lower intakes of protein, calcium, riboflavin and niacin in milk-avoiders.

In women, low milk intake during their childhood and teen years is linked to weaker bones in adulthood, putting them at greater risk of bone breaks.

Therefore, the best plan for good health is to eat a varied, nutritious and well-balanced diet, and keep yourself fit and healthy. To achieve good asthma control, you should follow a written asthma action plan developed with your doctor. Consuming three serves of dairy food every day - milk, cheese or yogurt - will help ensure that you meet your daily requirements for calcium and a range of other nutrients.

One serve of dairy food is equal to 250mL (1 cup) of milk, 200g (1 tub) of yogurt, or 40g (2 slices) of cheese.

National Asthma Council Australia recommendation

This message is supported by the National Asthma Council Australia. Dairy foods are recommended as part of a healthy balanced diet for most people with asthma, because of the unique combination of at least 10 essential nutrients. In childhood, dairy foods are crucial for bone development and growth, and for overall good health. For adults, dairy foods are also important for good health and well-being.

So consume three serves of dairy foods every day for overall good health.



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