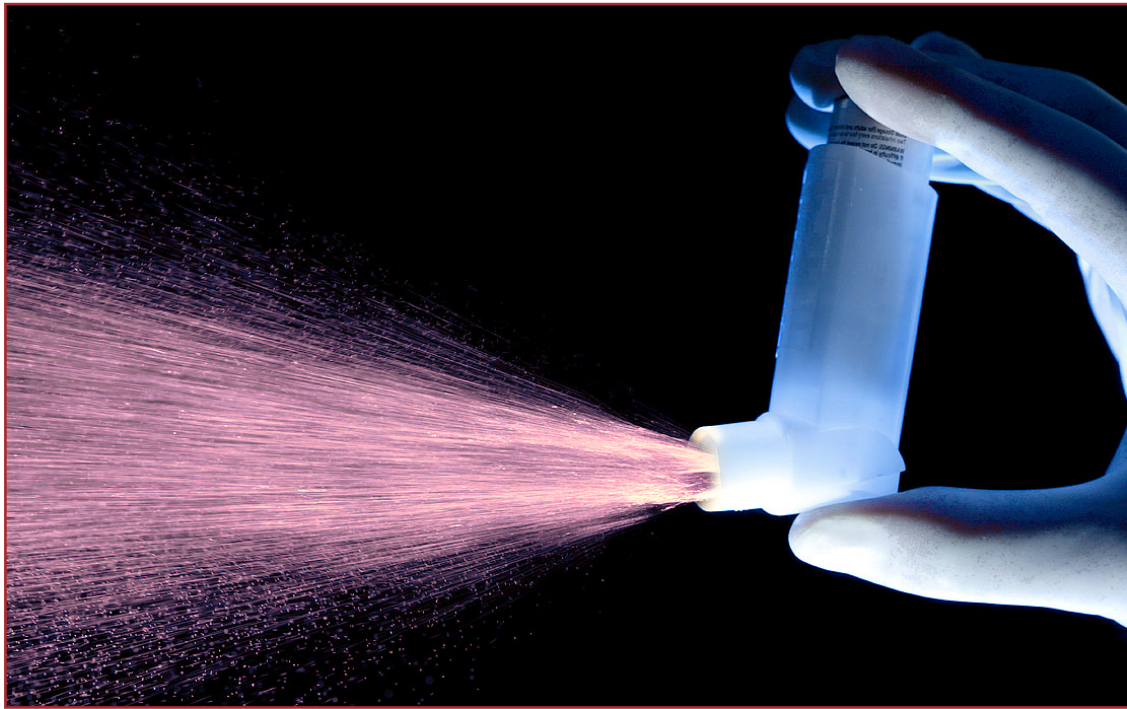


**ASTHMA** IT IS AN UNCOMFORTABLE ILLNESS BUT MANY PEOPLE SUFFER MORE THAN IS NECESSARY. **YVONNE GORDON** REPORTS

# When breath takes its toll



It's one of the most common ailments in the country and one of the scariest. Anyone who has suffered an asthma attack will know just how frightening it can be – your chest seems to close in, as if someone is sitting on it, you know how to breathe but seem, somehow, to have forgotten. Coughing sucks away vital air, leaving you gasping, clasping for respite.

For more than 470,000 people in Ireland, these symptoms will be all too familiar. Ireland ranks number four in the world asthma league after Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. One in five children and one in ten adults suffers from asthma here and with between 6,000 and 7,000 asthma-related hospital admissions every year and up to 100 asthma deaths, it's a considerable problem.

Frances Guiney, Asthma Nurse Specialist with the Asthma Society of Ireland, says that 95 per cent of asthma can be managed and controlled, once it is diagnosed and treated properly. 'A lot of people 'put up' with symptoms and feel they have to live with them,' she says, 'but their quality of life should be the same as someone without asthma.'

There are a number of causes of asthma and triggers are different for each person. Colds and 'flu, smoking, exercise, allergies, weather changes, air pollution, occupation, food and drink, emotions and even hormones can all play a part. Sometimes, a mix of several triggers, rather than just one, will set off an asthma attack. When this happens, a person's airways become irritated and the symptoms of asthma appear – difficulty in breathing, a tight feeling in the chest, wheezing and coughing. Worsening symptoms, if not treated, can build up into an asthma attack.

Guiney says that both being educated about the condition and complying with medication regimes is important. 'Know your own body and

your own condition,' she says. 'Asthma should be managed by a GP and assessed. Treatment is fine-tuned to the individual – there are times of the year where some people's asthma is worse and, at other times, they can reduce treatment. You are not on the same treatment for the rest of your life.'

Asthma was rare here 100 years ago and experts believe that it has increased in developed countries like Ireland over the last 20 years because of either changes in external environmental factors (such as allergic substances, pollution and smoking) or a change in how our bodies respond to these factors. 'Smoking is a very profound trigger – you're already starting off with a deficit in lung capacity with asthma and you'll compound it by smoking,' says Guiney.

A study in Ireland in 2002 found that adult asthma sufferers lose about 12 days from work every year, with children losing about ten school days. Asthma can start at any time in life, though it usually begins in childhood. It is an unpleasant illness, but according to the Asthma Society, most people with asthma can live normal lives and there are good treatments available. However, many sufferers do not have their symptoms under control, living with regular sleep disruption and shortness of breath.

There are many different medical treatments that can be used to keep asthma symptoms under control. 'Get to know your own body and what helps you,' says Guiney. 'Conventional medicine is tried and tested and some alternative treatments do not work,' she says. The Asthma Society recommends telling your doctor if you are trying a complementary treatment.

Visit: [www.asthmasociety.ie](http://www.asthmasociety.ie), Tel: (01) 878 8511 or email: [office@asthmasociety.ie](mailto:office@asthmasociety.ie)





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**NOT BREATHING WHEEZILY?**

■ When we breathe, air travels to our lungs through a series of tubes. With asthma, the airways become over-sensitive and muscles around the tube walls tighten, making them narrower. Sticky mucous can also be produced, clogging up passages.

■ **Relievers**, usually taken by inhaler, relax the muscles surrounding the airways, opening them wider and making it easier to breathe again.

Relievers are essential for treating asthma attacks as they work almost immediately.

■ **Preventers**, also taken by inhaler, stop airways becoming sensitive. This, in turn reduces the risk of severe asthma attacks. Other treatments include long-acting relievers or courses of steroids.



**The Asthma Attack Card gives advice on what to do during an asthma attack**

**NEXT WEEK** Hayfever: its causes and how to get relief [features@metroireland.ie](mailto:features@metroireland.ie)