



Keeping Warm This Winter Can Do More Harm Than Good

As part of World Asthma Day on May 3, NSW Health and the Asthma Foundation of NSW are warning parents about the harmful effects of unflued gas heaters on their child's asthma.

"Research on children exposed to unflued gas heating shows an increased rate of coughs, colds and asthma symptoms," said Dr Vicky Sheppeard, Senior Environmental Health Policy Officer with NSW Health.

"There is also evidence to suggest that exposure to unflued gas heaters may cause both respiratory symptoms and new asthma in children."

"Australia has the third highest prevalence of asthma in the world, with 2.2 million Australians affected, including 1 in 6 children. Asthma is the most common medical condition amongst school children and is the leading reason children are admitted to hospital. This chronic condition is also a common cause of school absenteeism and an estimated one million school days are lost every school year," said Fiona Krautil, CEO of the Asthma Foundation of NSW.

The Global theme for World Asthma Day 2005 is the 'unmet needs of asthma'. One unmet need identified by the Global Burden of Asthma Report, which details the prevalence, morbidity, and mortality of asthma in 20 regions around the world, is environmental health. In many countries, including Australia, efforts need to be made to address preventable factors, such as air pollution inside the home, that make the symptoms of people with asthma worse.

Gas heaters produce heat through burning gas fuel. When this fuel is burnt, air pollutants, such as carbon monoxide (CO) and nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) are produced.

A flued gas heater vents these air pollutants outside the home through a chimney or flue, while an unflued gas heater releases them directly into the home. This means that an unflued gas heater has the potential to cause indoor air pollution in your home that may affect your health.

"People with asthma and other respiratory diseases are particularly susceptible to the effects of exposure to nitrogen dioxide. Children may suffer more often from cold symptoms or asthma attacks if exposed over a prolonged period of time," said Dr Sheppeard



"Unflued gas heaters also produce water vapour. If there is not enough fresh air in the room, the water vapour can cause high humidity and wet surfaces. These conditions are ideal for dust mites and moulds, which also trigger asthma."

The use of unflued gas heaters in NSW is relatively common. The NSW Health 2002 Adult Health Survey, showed that 19.4 per cent of people reported they use a gas heater without a flue to heat their home, seven per cent use a gas heater with a flue, and 3.2 per cent use an open fireplace. Remaining respondents (49.2 per cent) used electric heaters.

There are a number of ways to avoid or reduce exposure to air pollutants from an unflued gas heater.

If you are choosing a new heater select a flued gas or electric heater.

If you already have an unflued heater:

- Be sure you ventilate your room properly. Check that the room you are heating has air vents and that these are not blocked. If you do not have air vents you should keep a door or a window open to allow the movement of air in and out of the room.
- Ensure that an unflued gas heater is the correct size for the area in your home you wish to heat.
- When using a heater, ensure that you are aware of the instructions for the use of the appliance. Read and follow any warning labels.
- Regular inspection and maintenance of your heater can assist with proper functioning.

The national enHealth Council, of which NSW Health is a member, has produced a new brochure on the health effects of unflued gas heaters. The brochure will be available from the Asthma Foundation of NSW and community health centres, or downloaded from http://enhealth.nphp.gov.au/news_enh.htm

A fact sheet on *Unflued gas heaters* is available from the NSW Health web site at www.health.nsw.gov.au.

If parents have any questions on asthma, they are encouraged to contact the Asthma Foundation on 1800 645 130.

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