

Asthma in NSW

What we learnt about your patients' needs

Asthma Foundation NSW has funded the largest ever survey of the needs and attitudes of people with asthma in NSW. The survey was carried out in 2007 by researchers from the Woolcock Institute of Medical Research and the Faculty of Pharmacy at University of Sydney.



Responses were received from around 700 adults or adolescents with asthma and parents/carers of children with asthma, from across major cities, inner regional and rural areas of NSW.

How well controlled is asthma in NSW?

According to current guidelines, the aim of asthma treatment is to achieve “good asthma control”. This means infrequent symptoms and reliever use (twice or less a week), no disturbance of sleep due to asthma, no exercise limitation, normal lung function, and no (or few) exacerbations or flare-ups.

Overall, asthma was not well-controlled in about 40% of both adults and children. Only one third of people with asthma had good asthma control.

What factors are contributing to poor asthma control in NSW?

We found the high rate of poor asthma control surprising, as the majority of people who completed the survey (87%) said that they were taking a “preventer” medication such as inhaled corticosteroids or inhaled corticosteroid-long-acting B₂-agonist combination. The effectiveness of these medications in improving asthma control is well known.

Factors which were independently associated with poor asthma control included:

- Smoking
- Younger age
- Living in socio-economically disadvantaged areas

One important contributor to poor asthma control, which cannot be assessed from a survey, is incorrect inhaler technique. Recent studies have confirmed that a high proportion of people with asthma are not using their inhalers correctly, but that they are unaware that they have a problem. This applies both to “puffers” and to the newer dry powder inhalers.

Asthma Foundation NSW has produced a range of brief videos to help people assess and improve their inhaler technique. These can be viewed at **www.asthmafoundation.org.au**. Health care professionals should ensure that they themselves can correctly use each type of inhaler, and that they regularly check the technique of their patients with asthma.

Asthma in NSW continued...

What is the impact of poor asthma control on people's lives?

Asthma, even when it is mild, has a significant impact on quality of life. We found that:

- Almost half of adults and children reported disturbed sleep due to asthma.
- In the last 4 weeks, asthma had interfered with daily activities for 57% of adults and 79% of children.
- In the last 12 months, 18% of adults and 62% of children had missed work or school due to asthma.
- Around 20% of adults felt that asthma was preventing them from achieving what they wanted from life, and were worried about asthma shortening their life.

What are the key problems that patients report in managing their asthma?

One quarter of people completing the survey reported that the cost of medications had interfered with the management of their asthma in the last 12 months. This was particularly noticeable for younger adults. The cost of seeing a GP or specialist was a problem for about 15% of adults. For parents/carers of children with asthma, 31% reported that they had difficulty getting an appointment with a GP about their child's asthma in the previous 12 months.

What is the impact of poor asthma control on health care use in NSW?

Poorly controlled asthma has a significant impact on our already stretched health care resources. In the last 12 months, 28% of adults, and an astonishing 62% of children had an episode of asthma requiring urgent health care (hospitalisation, Emergency Department visit, or urgent doctor visit).

Urgent asthma care was more common in younger people, those of non-English speaking background, and those in full-time employment. Over one third of people with asthma, especially young people, reported putting up with their asthma before taking any action. These people were much more likely to have needed urgent health care in the previous 12 months.

Some people with asthma only attend their GP when they are sick, e.g. because they can't get time off work, or are concerned about the cost, or don't feel that it is necessary. In the survey, one in five adults who required urgent asthma care in the last 12 months had not had a non-urgent doctor visit in that time to review their asthma.

Asthma guidelines emphasise the importance of regular medical review, for checking on asthma control, reviewing medications and trigger factors, and updating the written asthma action plan. Asthma Foundation NSW provides a fact sheet for people with asthma, to help them make the most of their time with their GP or practice nurse. This can be found at www.asthmafoundation.org.au in the Resources section.

Where do people with asthma in NSW obtain information about asthma?

Not surprisingly, most people obtained information about asthma and asthma medications from their doctor and pharmacist. The pharmacist was a particularly frequently used source of information for parents of children with asthma, and for people living in rural areas. However, people with asthma also obtained information from a multitude of other sources, including TV, newspapers, books, and the internet, as well as from sources such as asthma educators or consumer organisations such as Asthma Foundation NSW.

Over one third of parents of children with asthma reported obtaining information about asthma from relatives and friends. With the marked changes in asthma management in recent years, parents may receive conflicting information from different sources.

Although over two-thirds of all people completing this survey had accessed the internet in the previous 4 weeks, only half of these had used the internet for information about health issues. Health care professionals can assist people with asthma in finding reliable information on the internet, by writing "information prescriptions" for consumer websites such as Asthma Foundation.

Asthma Foundation NSW offers a range of free asthma information services and resources
Visit www.asthmafoundation.org.au • Call Asthma Information Line 1800 645 130

