

How to handle an emergency

How to recognise a serious asthma attack

An asthma attack can take anything from a few minutes to a few days to develop. During an asthma attack coughing, wheezing or breathlessness can quickly worsen.

Signs of an acute asthma attack requiring immediate action:

- Severe shortness of breath (struggling to breathe)
- Rapid shallow breathing
- Wheezing sound when breathing in and out (if wheezing stops with no improvement in symptoms it is an extreme EMERGENCY)
- Chest tightness (feels as if someone is sitting on chest)
- Unable to speak more than one or two words per breath
- Distressed or feeling frightened
- Little or no improvement after using reliever medication (Bricanyl, Ventolin, Respigen or Salamol)
- Areas at base of throat and between ribs 'sucking in' and out
- Blueness around the lips
- Hunching over

Note: Not all of the above symptoms may be present.

During an asthma attack, young children may appear restless, unable to settle and may have problems eating due to shortness of breath. They may also have severe coughing and vomiting.

If you (or anyone in your care) have any of the above signs, call an ambulance (dial 111) straight away and follow the 4-Step Asthma Emergency Plan.

4-Step Asthma Emergency Plan

1. Sit the person upright, and loosen any tight clothing. Stay with the person, remain calm and provide a reassuring attitude to help avoid panicking.
2. Without delay give 6 separate puffs of a reliever (Ventolin, Respigen or Salamol). The medication is best given one puff at a time via a spacer device. Use the puffer on its own if you don't have a spacer. Ask the person to take 6 breaths from the spacer after each puff of medication.
3. Wait 6 minutes.
4. If there is little or no improvement, repeat steps 2 and 3. If there is still little or no improvement, continuously repeat steps 2 and 3 whilst waiting for the ambulance.

