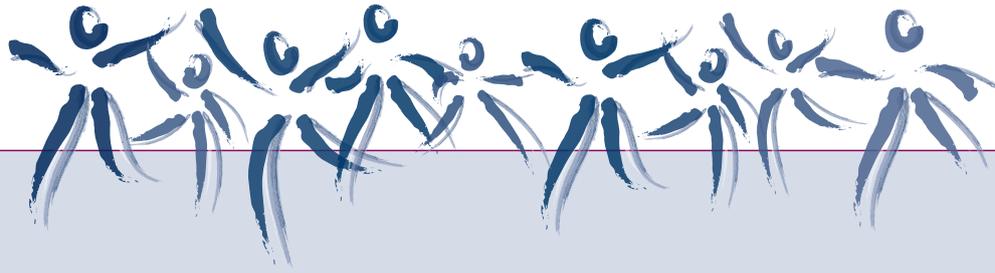


1. Introduction





Asthma is a common chronic inflammatory condition of the airways which presents as episodes of wheezing, breathlessness and chest tightness due to widespread narrowing of the airways. Among those with the condition, airway narrowing and symptoms can be triggered by viral infections, exercise, air pollutants, tobacco smoke or specific allergens such as house dust mites, pollens and animal danders. The symptoms of asthma are usually reversible, either spontaneously or with treatment.

While the underlying causes of asthma are still not well understood, there is evidence that environmental and lifestyle factors, as well as genetic factors such as an allergic tendency, may increase the risk of developing asthma.

Asthma affects people of all ages and is associated with a substantial impact on the community. While there is currently no cure for asthma, there are effective management strategies available to control the disease and prevent the worsening of asthma symptoms. However, there is evidence that the uptake of these strategies has not been optimal among people who could benefit greatly in terms of reducing the impact of asthma on both themselves and the community. For these reasons, it is important to continue to monitor the prevalence of asthma, its distribution within the community, markers of asthma exacerbations and the uptake of effective clinical management practices.

This report, the third in the *Asthma in Australia* series, describes the status of asthma in Australia in 2008 using a range of data sources. It aims to provide a wide audience, including health professionals, policy makers, health planners, academics, consumers and interested readers, with up-to-date summaries of data and trends for asthma in Australia.

As with the previous editions of *Asthma in Australia* published in 2003 and 2005, the scope of this report is based on the indicator framework for asthma, initially proposed in August 2000 (AIHW 2000) and then revised by ACAM (AIHW: Baker et al. 2004). This version of *Asthma in Australia* provides updates to data presented in the previous two editions and also includes new information. For example, we discuss occupational asthma and provide a detailed analysis from the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme data to describe the use of medications for the treatment of asthma in the Australian population. In this report, we have included a focus chapter on asthma in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians (Chapter 2). This draws together asthma-related information from a range of sources to describe the impact of this condition on our Indigenous population.

The remainder of the report contains data on disease prevalence (Chapter 3), mortality (Chapter 4), health-service utilisation and health-care expenditure for asthma (Chapter 5), asthma management, including the possession of asthma action plans and the use of pharmaceuticals (Chapter 6), selected risk factors contributing to asthma, including smoking, exposure to passive smoke and occupational asthma (Chapter 7), and quality of life and markers of asthma control (Chapter 8). The report describes the recent time trends and seasonal patterns in these indicators and, where data are available, examines differences between age groups, between males and females, between socioeconomic groups and between urban, rural and remote populations. Finally, for some of the indicators, comparisons among states and territories and with selected overseas countries are described.