

Christmas Day asthma attack warning

Monday 21 December, 2015

Asthma UK warns of a Christmas hospitalisation peak as the latest data from Public Health England¹ shows the number of people with asthma seeking GP appointments and calling NHS 111 are already above expected² levels for this time of year.

Research from Asthma UK³ carried out in recent weeks amongst people with asthma, and parents of children with asthma, that found one in eight (13%) will usually have to attend A&E because of worsening asthma symptoms at least once during the winter and that almost half (47%) have to see their (or their child's) GP or asthma nurse more often in the winter months. A&E asthma admissions have historically peaked at the end of December⁴ so these latest figures indicate that we could see A&E admissions increasing in the next week, right at the start of the Christmas period. Some asthma attacks can be prevented if people with asthma are able to get their symptoms under control.

Kay Boycott, Chief Executive of Asthma UK said: "This Christmas Day, someone will be having a potentially life threatening asthma attack every 10 seconds and these latest figures suggest this number could be higher. No-one wants to wake up in hospital on any day, let alone Christmas day. There is nothing as terrifying as watching a child or a loved one struggle to breathe so it's vital that people with asthma know how to spot the signs of an attack and what to do if their symptoms get worse. Following Asthma UK's five top tips might help prevent some of the predicted 30 asthma attacks during the Queen's speech alone."

Dr David Jackson, Lead asthma physician, Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Trust and senior researcher at the MRC & Asthma UK Centre, Imperial College London, adds: "At Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Trust there has been a notable rise in the number of patients with asthma coming to A&E with worsening symptoms; many of the more severe patients needing to be admitted for long stays. The majority of patients appear to become unwell following the onset of common cold and flu-like symptoms because their defence against respiratory viral infections may be impaired. Fortunately researchers have recently identified a number of exciting new therapies that should be available in the next few years aimed at reducing the impact of viral infections on people with asthma. Until then, patients should take their regular preventer medication every day without fail to reduce the likelihood of a severe asthma attack developing if they are unfortunate enough to catch a virus."

With just over a week left until Christmas Day, make sure you follow Asthma UK's five top tips:

- 1. Take your medicines as prescribed – especially your preventer inhalers. These reduce the inflammation in your lungs so that you are less likely to react to triggers such as cold weather and cold and flu viruses.
- 2. Check your inhalers now to make sure that you have enough medicine to last you over Christmas and New Year. If you don't then request a new prescription now and collect it as soon as you can so that you are prepared.
- 3. Take a note of opening and closing times of your local GP and pharmacy and keep them with you, for example on your phone.
- 4. Know the warning signs of an attack. Make an appointment to see your GP or asthma nurse as soon as you can if you experience any of these symptoms: needing to use more of your reliever inhaler, waking in the night coughing or wheezing, feeling like you can't keep up with your normal activities, (children may complain that they have a tummy ache).
- 5. Don't be afraid to call for help; if you are having an attack and your reliever inhaler is not helping, you should call 999.

More information is available online at www.asthma.org.uk or via the Asthma UK Helpline on 0300 222 5800. Lines are open Monday-Friday 9am – 5pm (lines closed 24 December – 4 January).

ENDS

For more information please contact the Asthma UK media team on mediaoffice@asthma.org.uk, 020 7786 4949 (during office hours) or 07951 721393 (outside of office hours).

Notes to editors

- 1) <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/syndromic-surveillance-systems-and-analyses>

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2) Data from a number of previous years (usually a period of 5-7 years) is averaged in order to produce a figure of the levels that should be expected to give a baseline.

3) Asthma UK Winter Wellness survey conducted online via Survey Monkey between 24 November and 8 December 2015, 1679 respondents.

4) The five year average high rate of admissions of 17.5 cases per 100,000 people usually occurs in the last week of December.

Top asthma triggers at Christmas

Asthma UK posted an online Survey Monkey about Christmas asthma triggers. 1,600 people completed the survey in October and November 2015.

- The Top Five Festive asthma triggers that make people's asthma worse are:
 - Cold/damp weather (78.32%),
 - Colds/flu (72.85%),
 - Cigarette smoke (58.55%),
 - Scented candles (45.07%),
 - Dusty decorations (43.80%)
- Almost one third of respondents told us they had to change festive plans (32.29%) because of their/their child's asthma.
- We have a case study of a 23-year-old man who had an asthma attack two years ago, when his parents took their Christmas decorations down from the loft. The combination of dust from the decorations coupled with the scented candles they lit triggered an asthma attack. He was taken to hospital by ambulance and was in intensive care for a week and a half, but released just before Christmas Day. Let us know if you would like us to arrange an interview.

About Asthma UK

- Asthma UK's mission is to stop asthma attacks and cure asthma. We do this by funding world leading research, campaigning for improved care and supporting people to reduce their risk of a potentially life threatening asthma attack.
- Asthma UK is solely funded by public donations
- The Asthma UK Helpline is open weekdays from 9am to 5pm on 0300 222 5800.
- For more information about asthma please visit www.asthma.org.uk

Background information on asthma

- In the UK, 5.4 million people are currently receiving treatment for asthma: 1.1 million children (1 in 11) and 4.3 million adults (1 in 12).

The UK has one of the highest prevalence rates for asthma in Europe, according to [the ERS Whitebook](#).

The UK has some of the highest asthma death rates in Western Europe according to the [Death rates \(all ages\) for OECD nations](#) and the [World Health Organisation](#)

Three people die every day because of asthma; based on mortality data from [Office for National Statistics \(ONS\) for England & Wales](#), [General Register Office for Scotland](#), and [Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency \(Northern Ireland\)](#). 1255 people died from asthma in 2013 – divided by 365, this works out as 3.4 people per day.

- Tragically, the [National Review of Asthma Deaths](#) found that two thirds of asthma deaths are preventable with good, basic care.
- 7 out of 10 people with asthma do not receive care that meets the most basic clinical standards.

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