

Thunderstorm asthma

If you are allergic to ryegrass pollen, you need to be taking preventive asthma treatment well before springtime thunderstorms and pollen season.

Most adults and adolescents with asthma need preventive medication all year – not just a blue/grey puffer for asthma symptoms.



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Disclaimer: It is important to note that information contained in this fact sheet is not intended to replace professional medical advice. Any questions regarding a medical diagnosis or treatment should be directed to a medical practitioner.

What is thunderstorm asthma?

Thunderstorm asthma is when asthma symptoms are caused by ryegrass pollen allergy during springtime thunderstorms.

Thunderstorm asthma can happen suddenly to people in spring or summer when there is a lot of grass pollen in the air and the weather is stormy.

Spring thunderstorm weather can cause pollen grains to burst into tiny pieces and the wind then blows them around us. When people with pollen allergy breathe in these tiny pieces of pollen, they can get deep inside the lungs and trigger an asthma attack.

More about asthma symptoms

People who wheeze and sneeze with hay fever from pollens during spring can sometimes get thunderstorm asthma even if they haven't had asthma before.

On Monday 21 November 2016, the combination of thunderstorms and pollen caused an asthma disaster in Victoria. Thousands of people suddenly had asthma attacks and found it hard to breathe. Because so many people needed urgent asthma treatment at one time, it was hard for ambulance and hospital emergency rooms to help everyone.

From that terrible event we learned that thunderstorm asthma can affect people living in city or country areas, even if they've never had asthma. We also learned that some groups of people are much more likely to get thunderstorm asthma.

Who gets thunderstorm asthma?

You could have thunderstorm asthma if you are outside in gusty wind just before a thunderstorm on a day when there is a lot of pollen in the air AND you are allergic to ryegrass pollen.

This includes:

- people with asthma whose symptoms get worse in springtime
- people with asthma who are allergic to grass pollen
- people with asthma who get hay fever in springtime
- people with springtime hay fever, even if they have not been told they have asthma.

This means people with asthma and springtime hay fever need extra protection to avoid thunderstorm asthma if they are in a region with a lot of grass pollen.

The season for pollen and thunderstorms depends on where you are in Australia. In Victoria and NSW (most of south-eastern Australia) this is usually between September and December.

How to stay safe

Before springtime

Keep taking your asthma medicines prescribed by your doctor. Most adults and adolescents with asthma need more protection than just a blue/grey puffer.

Medicines that contain inhaled corticosteroids help protect people from severe asthma attacks. Australian research shows that these kinds of asthma treatments might also protect you from severe thunderstorm asthma.

These medicines include preventer inhalers that you use every day, and some inhalers that you take just when you have symptoms.

If you only use a blue-grey puffer, you may need more protection before the pollen and thunderstorm season. Ask your doctor to check your asthma.

Make sure you have a written asthma action plan that is up to date. If not, ask your doctor to write one.

During springtime

Always carry your reliever inhaler.

Stay up to date with pollen counts and weather forecasts during spring and early summer so you know if a storm is coming.

Just before and during storms with wind gusts, get inside a building or car with the windows shut and the air conditioner switched to recirculate/recycled.

People with allergic rhinitis (hay fever) but not asthma

People with springtime hay fever should also avoid being outside in gusty wind during a spring thunderstorm in a place where there is ryegrass pollen in the air (most of south-eastern Australia).

Effective treatment is available for hay fever, but we don't know if it can protect people from thunderstorm asthma.

Talk to your doctor about which treatment is best for you.

More about asthma symptoms

nationalasthma.org.au/understanding-asthma/what-is-asthma

Need more information?

Visit the National Asthma Council Australia's website nationalasthma.org.au