

Epidemic thunderstorm asthma: Let's all be prepared

Information for community pharmacies – October 2020

Overview

Grass pollen season has officially begun, bringing an increase in asthma and hay fever and the chance of epidemic thunderstorm asthma. Victoria's epidemic thunderstorm asthma risk forecasting system was also switched on 1 October and will run until 31 December, the end of the grass pollen season.

Community pharmacies have an important role to play in supporting good asthma and hay fever management, which not only improves quality of life but also reduces the risk of asthma exacerbations including those related to epidemic thunderstorm asthma events.

More than ever before, this year it is important for people to manage any hay fever or asthma symptoms, as these conditions can produce symptoms that are similar to coronavirus (COVID-19) such as a runny nose, cough or shortness of breath. People with hay fever or asthma symptoms may touch their face more frequently, increasing their risk of being infected with coronavirus if they are not practicing appropriate hand hygiene. People who are sneezing and coughing from their hay fever or asthma may also produce more droplets and, if they have coronavirus (COVID-19), may be more likely to spread the infection to others.

What should pharmacists do?

Preparing your pharmacy and staff

- Review the updated *Australian Asthma Handbook* at: <https://www.astmahandbook.org.au/about/updates/highlights-of-version-2-1-update>.
- In September 2020, the National Asthma Council published an updated version of the Australian Asthma Handbook (version 2.1). The biggest change to the updated Australian Asthma Handbook is that few adults and adolescents aged 12 years and over should now be using a short acting reliever medication alone to manage their asthma. Most should either have regular daily maintenance ICS (low dose) + SABA reliever or as-needed low-dose budesonide–formoterol.
- Ensure you have additional stocks of salbutamol inhalers and non-static spacers over spring.
- Ensure all staff are familiar with epidemic thunderstorm asthma, asthma first aid and display first aid instructions in a prominent place¹.
- Check the daily epidemic thunderstorm asthma forecast, which is available on the VicEmergency website and app, and consider setting up a watch zone for your area to receive advice and warnings on high risk forecast days. You can also access an abridged version of the epidemic thunderstorm asthma forecast in addition to grass pollen forecasts from the Melbourne Pollen website and app.
- Be prepared for a potential influx of people with asthma during an epidemic thunderstorm asthma event. Consider keeping a special kit ready with spacers and salbutamol puffers for emergency reserve use and ensure staff are prepared to respond.

¹ Asthma first aid posters are available to download from:

Asthma Australia: <https://asthma.org.au/what-we-do/how-we-can-help/first-aid/>.

The National Asthma Council: <https://www.nationalasthma.org.au/asthma-first-aid>

- Have capacity to record contact details of anyone present in the pharmacy during an event, including clients, visitors and staff, in a manner that can be easily retrieved if required.

Preparing clients for the risk of epidemic thunderstorm asthma

Clients who attend with asthma

- Ask clients if they have an up to date asthma action plan and whether it includes information on epidemic thunderstorm asthma. If they don't yet have a plan or if it has been more than a year since it was last reviewed, recommend clients see their GP. Remind clients of the need to take asthma medication as prescribed by their doctor to ensure good control.
- For clients purchasing reliever medication, ask them if they are relying on reliever medication alone, and if appropriate advise them of new treatment options available in line with the National Asthma Handbook and encourage them to see their GP for review of their care, to update their asthma action plan and make sure any associated hay fever is well managed.
- Ask clients if they also have hay fever and provide advice on hay fever management (see below).
- Ask clients whether they are aware of epidemic thunderstorm asthma and advise that they are considered to be at increased risk, and that having poor control of asthma or both asthma and hay fever, increases the risk further.
- Remind clients of the need to carry reliever medication in the grass pollen season and provide support if needed to ensure clients know how to use it (ideally with a spacer).
- Remind clients to be alert to and act on the development of asthma symptoms as explained in their asthma action plan if they have one, or if they don't, to use asthma first aid. Encourage clients to ensure that their family and friends also know asthma first aid so that they can provide assistance if required. Direct clients to asthma first aid resources.²
- Encourage clients to check the epidemic thunderstorm asthma forecast during the grass pollen season, via the VicEmergency or Melbourne pollen website or app.
- Advise clients to avoid storms in the grass pollen season (October through December), especially the wind gusts that come before the storm, and to plan their day to stay out of them.
- Share epidemic thunderstorm asthma resources, such as the 'What is thunderstorm asthma?' brochure, which is available in a range of community languages, or direct clients to the thunderstorm asthma information on the Better Health Channel (including via promotion through social media)³.
- Remind clients that if they experience symptoms that are at all different to their usual asthma symptoms, they should get tested for coronavirus (COVID-19) and stay home until they have received their results.

Clients who attend for management of seasonal allergic rhinitis (seasonal hay fever):

- Provide advice on effective hay fever management and work with clients to optimise symptom control, including consideration of intra nasal corticosteroids.
- Complete allergic rhinitis treatment plans⁴ and provide them to your clients.

² Asthma first aid resources including videos and other resources are available from Asthma Australia and the Better Health Channel:

<https://asthma.org.au/what-we-do/how-we-can-help/first-aid/>

<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/thunderstorm-asthma>

³ The brochure and other resources, are available to download or order free of charge from: <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/environmental-health/climate-weather-and-public-health/thunderstorm-asthma/toolkit>. Social media posts are also available from the same website.

⁴ Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy (ASCIA): <https://www.allergy.org.au/patients/allergic-rhinitis-hay-fever-and-sinusitis/allergic-rhinitis-treatment-plan>

- For those with asthma as well, ask about management (see above).
- For those with no prior diagnosis of asthma, ask if they ever get symptoms of asthma (such as wheezing, shortness of breath, a feeling of tightness in the chest or a persistent cough) as asthma commonly accompanies hay fever. If so, they could have undiagnosed asthma and should be encouraged to see their GP for investigation and diagnosis.
- For clients with current, past or undiagnosed asthma or hay fever, ask them whether they are aware they are at increased risk of epidemic thunderstorm asthma.
- Encourage clients to check the epidemic thunderstorm asthma forecast during the grass pollen season, via the VicEmergency or Melbourne pollen website or app.
- Advise clients to avoid storms in the grass pollen season (October through December), especially the wind gusts that come before the storm, and to plan their day to stay out of them.
- Describe an asthma attack and remind clients to be alert to and act on such an event, including using asthma first aid and to follow up with their GP. Encourage clients to ensure that their family and friends also know asthma first aid so that they can provide assistance if required. Direct clients to asthma first aid resources.⁵
- Advise clients that they should have reliever medication appropriately available during the grass pollen season (and know that they can purchase it from the pharmacy without a prescription).
- Share epidemic thunderstorm asthma resources, such as the ‘What is thunderstorm asthma?’ brochure, which is available in a range of community languages, or direct clients to the thunderstorm asthma information on the Better Health Channel (including via promotion through social media)⁶.
- Remind clients that if they experience symptoms that are at all different to their usual hay fever symptoms, they should get tested for coronavirus (COVID-19) and stay home until they have received their results.

Further information

- Thunderstorm asthma: Prepare your patients for spring checklist: <https://www.nationalasthma.org.au/living-with-asthma/resources/health-professionals/information-paper/thunderstorm-asthma-pharmacy>
- Vic Emergency thunderstorm asthma forecast: <https://emergency.vic.gov.au/prepare/#thunderstorm-asthma-forecast>
- Melbourne pollen: <https://www.melbournepollen.com.au/>
- Epidemic thunderstorm asthma information:
 - <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/environmental-health/climate-weather-and-public-health/thunderstorm-asthma>
 - <https://www.nationalasthma.org.au/living-with-asthma/resources/health-professionals/information-paper/thunderstorm-asthma>
- COVID-19 information: <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus>

⁵ Asthma first aid resources including videos and other resources are available from Asthma Australia and the Better Health Channel:

<https://asthma.org.au/what-we-do/how-we-can-help/first-aid/>

<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/thunderstorm-asthma>

⁶ The brochure and other resources, are available to download or order free of charge from: <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/environmental-health/climate-weather-and-public-health/thunderstorm-asthma/toolkit>. Social media posts are also available from the same website.

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