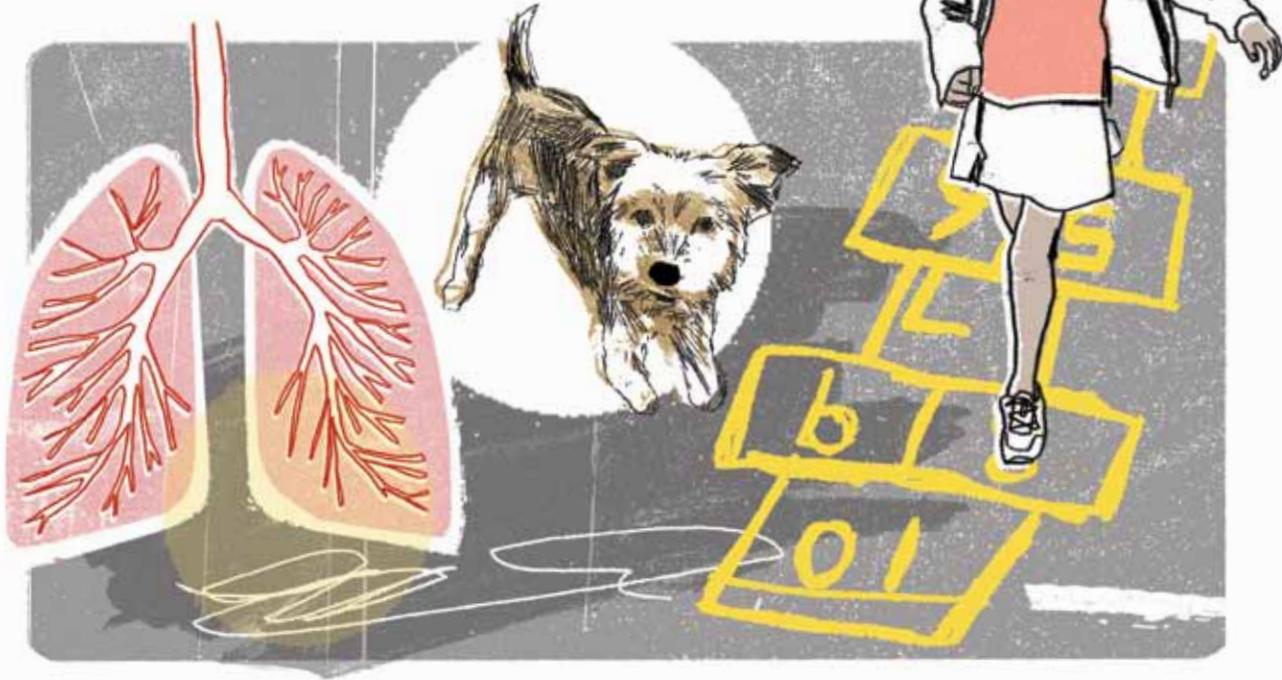


# Breathe easy

The UK has one of the highest asthma rates worldwide. We explain why understanding the condition is key to controlling it



**On average, there are two children with asthma** in every classroom in the UK. Asthma affects the airways – the tubes that transport air to and from the lungs. When someone with asthma comes into contact with an asthma trigger, the muscles around the walls of the tubes contract and narrow, the lining of the airways starts to swell and a sticky mucus is often produced, which can cause breathing difficulties.

## The triggers

Scientists are unsure what exactly causes asthma, but it's thought that many factors may

contribute to its development. Smoking is a huge factor – a child is 35 per cent more at risk of developing asthma if their mum smokes during pregnancy. Being overweight can make it worse, while children are more likely to develop it if there's a history of asthma or of allergies in the family. Other triggers include pollution, animal hair, dust mites and viral infections.

Although many of us are born with asthma, you can develop it at any time. If you think you or your child may be showing asthma symptoms, see your GP to discuss the best ways to manage the condition.

## Living with asthma

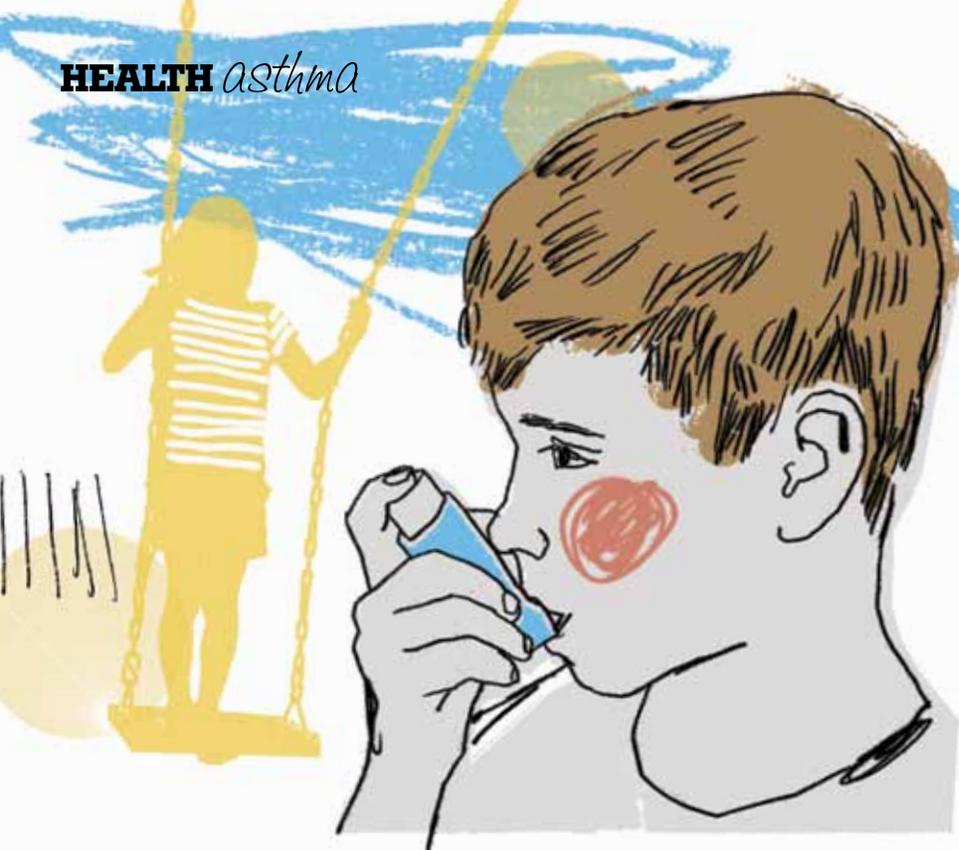
The most effective way of managing asthma is to inhale medicine straight into the lungs. Reliever

inhalers, which are blue (below), and preventer inhalers, which are brown, are the most commonly used devices. Relievers are used to quickly reduce symptoms by relaxing the muscles surrounding the airways. Preventers are used on a more regular basis and help to control the swelling of the airways, thereby reducing the risk of attacks. There are also devices known as spacers, which are larger containers with a mouthpiece at one end where you fit your inhaler. These make inhalers easier to use. ►

*An Asda pharmacist can carry out an asthma control test and advise you what to do next*

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## CASE STUDY

Emma Russell's 13-year-old son, Paul, was diagnosed with asthma at the age of three. According to Emma, confidence is key when it comes to teaching children how to manage their asthma. 'We must teach children to be responsible for their own condition – they need to identify their triggers and symptoms.' But getting to grips with Paul's condition hasn't been easy. 'We manage the majority of his attacks with a reliever inhaler at home, but if he doesn't respond, we would consider going to hospital. Paul is very aware of the symptoms of an attack. His chest tightens – he says it's like trying to breath through a squashed straw!'



### What to look for

The symptoms of asthma include coughing, wheezing, a shortness of breath and a tightness in the chest. Some people have symptoms occasionally; others have them all the time. If you have asthma and experience these symptoms, take one to two puffs of your reliever inhaler or as directed by your GP. If this doesn't help and symptoms worsen, you're more than likely having an asthma attack. If you're using your reliever more than three times a week, your condition is not as controlled as it could be and might be getting worse. Don't ignore these warning signs, book to see your GP or asthma nurse.

### What to do during an attack

Take one to two puffs of your reliever inhaler; sit down and try to take slow, steady breaths. If you don't start to feel better, take two puffs every two minutes. If, after 10 puffs, your condition hasn't improved, call 999. In the meantime, continue to take two puffs every two minutes if your condition still doesn't improve. If symptoms do ease and you don't need to call 999, see your GP or asthma nurse within 24 hours.

### Asthma at school

Schools are prevented from keeping spare relievers on site as they're prescription-only. This means if a child forgets their inhaler, there's no medication

available. Asthma charities want these rules changed. 'Going without these medicines can be dangerous,' says Emily Humphreys, Head of Policy and Public Affairs at Asthma UK. 'It's crucial that the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency changes the rules and allows schools to keep spare inhalers as a last resort.'

Asthma UK says there's a lack of understanding of the condition. 'It's crucial that children know how to use their inhalers and understand why different inhalers are used,' says Dr Graham Robert, trustee at asthma charity AAIR (Asthma, Allergy and Inflammation Research). 'A mistake that children who use both inhalers often make is using their preventer when they need their reliever. Consider labelling a preventer with a sticker that reads "Use twice a day".'

If your child has asthma,

make sure school staff know what medication they take, how much and how often, as well as the triggers. And inform them of any changes to their condition.

### The good news

It's actually a misconception that there's been a huge increase in the number of children being diagnosed with asthma. 'It's questionable whether asthma is rising,' says Dr Mark Everard, a respiratory expert at Sheffield's Children's Hospital. 'Better diagnosis and over-diagnosis led to a perceived rise in the 1980s and 1990s, but the number of children diagnosed with asthma over the past decade appears to have fallen.'

*Every 17 minutes a child is admitted to hospital because of asthma. Visit [asthma.org.uk](http://asthma.org.uk) for support and advice*