

Asthma

Headlines

Asthma affected almost 1 in 5 (18%) 14-year olds in 2009¹ and 1 in 9 (11%) adults in Kirklees in 2012². The irritants that can trigger asthma can be very different for each person; however cigarette smoke, housing conditions and air quality are common triggers. Children whose parents smoke are twice as likely to develop asthma.

Locally in 2012:

- People with asthma were more likely to do no moderate physical activity.
- Older people with asthma were more likely to be obese, and more likely to smoke.
- 1 in 5 people with asthma smoked.
- 1 in 4 people with asthma thought their poor health was due to inadequate housing.

Why is this issue important?

Asthma is a common condition. Its symptoms include breathlessness, tightness in the chest, coughing (particularly at night) and wheezing which is reversible. Asthma differs from [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease](#) (COPD) in that the airflow restriction is mostly reversible, whereas in COPD it is only partially reversible as there is permanent damage to the airways. Asthma is caused when there is inflammation or swelling in the airways of the lung, so they become narrower. The inflammation causes the airways to become twitchy or irritable and they can narrow easily in response to a wide range of triggers. Experiencing wheeze indicates the severity and lack of control of the condition.

The most common triggers for asthma are:

- Cold or warm air.
- Exercise.
- Allergies e.g. dogs, cats, house dust mites.
- Irritants such as cigarette smoke, fumes, dusty atmospheres.
- The common cold.

Some of these triggers can be prevented or avoided.

Locally, in 2012, 1 in 9 (11%) people aged 18-44 years had asthma. Nearly 1 in 10 (10%) of those aged 45-64 years and aged over 65 years had asthma². Asthma accounted for approximately 234 emergency hospital admissions in 2011, a decrease from 2010³.

What significant factors are affecting this issue?

Physical inactivity

Those with asthma who did less than the recommended level of [physical activity](#) (11%) were slightly more than Kirklees overall (10%)². Not doing enough physical activity can lead to those with asthma being more likely to be overweight or [obese](#).

Smoking and tobacco use

About 1 in 5 (23%) people with asthma smoked, similar to overall in Kirklees².

[Housing](#)

4% of people with asthma said that their house was not suitable due to damp, compared with 3% of non-asthmatics².

Atmosphere

Air pollutants like cigarette smoke and car and industrial exhaust fumes release gases and particles into the atmosphere which can irritate the airways of people with asthma. Ozone levels can be a problem for some asthmatics; these are more likely to be higher on hot days.

Which groups are most affected by this issue?

Children

Locally, in 2009, nearly 1 in 5 (18%) 14-year olds had asthma¹, higher than nationally⁴. Those under 18 had the highest rate of hospital admissions for asthma at 2.4 per 1,0003. Children are more likely to be admitted for asthma during September than any other time of year⁴. 1 in 11 children in the UK received treatment for asthma in 2006/74. Out of 56 countries worldwide, the UK had the highest occurrence of severe wheeze in children aged 13-14 years⁴.

Exposure to a number of the risk factors happens in early life. Mothers [smoking](#) during [pregnancy](#) and babies having a low birth weight can increase the risk of developing asthma in childhood by four to six times⁵. Children whose parents smoked were twice as likely to develop asthma than children whose parents did not smoke⁶.

Working age adults

Locally in 2012, of those people with asthma aged under 65 years, 3 in 5 (59%) were overweight compared to half (51%) of non-asthmatics. This had nearly doubled since 2008 (32%)⁷. Over 1 in 4 (28%) were obese, compared to less than 1 in 5 (18%) non-asthmatics, the same as 2008. Over 1 in 7 (13%) working age adults with asthma were slightly more likely to not do moderate physical activity at all than 6%² overall.

Of those aged under 65 years with asthma 1 in 4 (26%) smoked, similar to overall. Over 1 in 4 (27%) people aged under 65 years with asthma had sleep disturbance from wheezing, compared to 3% overall².

Older people

The symptoms of asthma in [older people](#) are less likely to be triggered by allergies such as house-dust mites, animals and pollen. They are more likely to be triggered by flu, colds or other viral infections and irritants such as smoke, air temperature change, perfumes and chemical fumes. For older people, shortness of breath may be the only symptom. However it can be difficult to tell the difference between asthma and other conditions that cause similar symptoms, such as bronchitis, emphysema, [heart disease](#) and COPD.

Locally, in 2012², of those aged over 65 years with asthma, over 1 in 4 (25%) were obese, compared to 1 in 7 (17%) of non-asthmatics, similar to 2008⁷. 1 in 4 (25%) people with asthma aged over 65 years did no moderate physical activity similar to non-asthmatics, 14%².

Where is this causing greatest concern?

[Dewsbury](#) and [Huddersfield](#) South had the highest rates of those with asthma of 1 in 8 (13%)².

What could commissioners and service planners consider?

- Ensure stop smoking programmes target people with asthma and those with children.

- Improve access to physical activity programmes designed for those with respiratory illness and asthma.
- Ensure that those diagnosed with asthma have a self-management plan.
- Implement an awareness campaign targeted towards parents of children with asthma reminding them to take their medication during the summer holidays.
- Work with housing providers to improve housing quality, particularly for people with asthma.

References

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4. Asthma UK. Available from: <http://www.asthma.org.uk/>
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6. National Asthma Campaign Asthma Audit, Out in the Open. A True Picture of Asthma in the UK Today. Asthma J 6; September 2001.
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