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Asthma

Headlines

Asthma affected almost 1 in 5 14 year olds in 2009 and 1 in 8 adults in Kirklees in 2008. 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 50% more likely to develop asthma.

Locally in 2008, people with asthma:

- Were more likely to do no physical activity at all.
- Older people with asthma were more likely to be overweight, and more likely to smoke.
- 1 in 5 smoked.
- 1 in 4 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 in asthma 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. Due to the inflammation, the airways are twitchy or irritable and can narrow easily in response to a wide range of triggers. Experiencing wheeze indicates the severity and 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, 1 in 8 (13%) people aged 18-44 years had asthma, compared with 1 in 9 (11%) aged 45-64 years and 1 in 7 (14%) aged over 65 years¹.

What significant factors are affecting this issue?

Physical inactivity

Those with asthma were nearly twice as likely (13%) to do no activity at all than overall (7.8%)¹. This can lead to those with asthma being more likely to be overweight or obese.

Smoking and tobacco use

About 1 in 5 (21%) people with asthma smoked, similar to overall in Kirklees¹.

Housing

In those aged under 65 years with asthma, 15% said that their home was not adequate for their needs because it was damp, cold and uncomfortable, compared with 11% of non-asthmatics¹.

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 affected most by this issue?

Children

Locally, nearly 1 in 5 (18%) 14 year olds had asthma², higher than nationally³.

1 in 11 children in the UK are receiving treatment for asthma³. Out of 56 countries worldwide, the UK has the highest occurrence of severe wheeze in children aged 13-14 years³.

Exposure to a number of the risk factors happens in early life. Mothers smoking during pregnancy and babies having a low birth weight for example, increase the risk of developing asthma in childhood by four to six times⁴. Smoking in pregnancy significantly increases the risk of low birth weight (see infant deaths). Children whose parents smoke are 50% more likely to develop asthma⁵.

Working age adults

Locally in 2008, of those people with asthma aged under 65 years, 32% were overweight and a further 23% were obese, the latter slightly higher than the overall population. Working age adults with asthma were nearly twice as likely (13%) to do no activity at all than overall (7%).

Of those aged under 65 years with asthma 22% smoked, similar to overall. 27% of people aged under 65 years with asthma had sleep disturbance from wheezing, compared to 3% overall.

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 instead 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 2008, of those aged over 65 years with asthma, 25% were obese, compared to 18% of non-asthmatics. 37% of people with asthma aged over 65 years did no physical activity compared with 24% of non-asthmatics. For older people with asthma, 34% were woken by wheeze¹.

Where is this causing greatest concern?

There was little variation across the localities, the same as previous years.

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.
- Work with housing providers to improve housing quality for people with asthma.

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