

2012 Asthma Information

- New Zealand has some of the highest rates of childhood asthma in the world.¹
- One in four New Zealand children has asthma.¹
 - This is over 296,000 children.² See calculations below on the estimated numbers of children with asthma based on the 1 in 4 figure and the number of children in particular regions (2006 census data).
- One in six New Zealand adults has asthma.¹
- Based on these numbers of children and adults, over 600 000 New Zealanders are affected by asthma and other respiratory conditions.²
- People do still die from asthma. 79 deaths in 2006, 61 in 2007 and 65 in 2008.⁸
- Although the prevalence of asthma in New Zealand is similar for Maori and non-Maori children, Maori children with asthma tend to have more severe symptoms, require hospitalisation for asthma almost twice as often as non Maori children; and require more time off school because of asthma.³
- In New Zealand it costs about **\$1200 per day** to treat a child in hospital for asthma.⁴
- The economic burden of asthma in New Zealand has been conservatively estimated at over \$800,000,000 per year.¹
- Children in New Zealand lose approximately 550,000 school days every year to asthma⁵.
- Asthma affects approximately 235 million people worldwide and the prevalence is rising.⁶
- Asthma causes an estimated 250,000 deaths annually.⁶

Table showing estimated number of children with asthma under 15 in each region

This is derived using 2006 census population data² and that 1 in 4 children have asthma¹ (numbers rounded to nearest hundred).

Region	Total children <15	Estimated children < 15 with asthma
Northland	35,200	8,800
Auckland	288,400	72,100
Waikato	88,800	22,200
BOP	60,000	15,000
Gisborne	11,600	2,900
Taranaki	22,800	5,700
Hawke's Bay	34,400	8,600
Manawatu-Wanganui	48,800	12,200
Wellington	92,800	23,200
Tasman	10,000	2,500
Nelson	8,400	2,100
Marlborough	8,000	2,000
Canterbury	103,200	25,800
West Coast	6,400	1,600
Otago	34,800	8,700
Southland	19,200	4,800
TOTAL	1,184,800	296,200

Common Asthma Questions

How serious a problem is asthma in New Zealand?

- Asthma is a major health problem in New Zealand affecting about 1 in 4 children and 1 in 6 adults.¹
- Thankfully, with better treatment, asthma deaths are much less common than they were (65 deaths in 2008, last year for which we have such records⁸).
- It is the leading cause of years lost to disability for males and the third leading cause among females (2002).¹
- Asthma and respiratory infections are one of the most common cause of hospital admissions for children (2002).³
- Treating a child in a New Zealand hospital because of their asthma costs about **\$1200 per day** (Ministry of Health figures).⁴ The flow on financial costs in terms of the days off school and work, for example, are huge.
- Children with asthma lose 550,000 school days every year from asthma.⁵
- The Children's learning study demonstrated a link between new entrant schoolchildren having asthma and lower reading achievements.⁵

What are some of the common misconceptions around asthma?

- That asthma is a mild disease - many people have mild asthma but for some people it can be a severe and life-threatening disease. Even people who usually have few symptoms can have severe asthma attacks and they can start very suddenly. The good news is that asthma symptoms and control can almost always be improved with the right treatment.
- That people with asthma cannot exercise - although exercise can sometimes bring on asthma symptoms it is important not to avoid exercise - people with asthma need to keep fit just as much as anyone else. If you have asthma symptoms when you try to exercise, this is a sign that your asthma is not under control and you should discuss this with your doctor. With better treatment you should be able to exercise without symptoms. It is worth knowing that many elite athletes have asthma - in fact, Olympic medal winners have a higher rate of asthma than the general population⁸, so there is no reason to let your asthma stop you from being fit.
- Asthma "is in the mind". Thankfully most people now realise that this isn't true. Although people with anxiety disorders can sometimes experience breathing difficulties, the inflammation and airway changes that we see in asthma are not caused by psychosomatic illness.

Are you seeing any concerning trends in asthma?

Asthma is still a major problem in New Zealand - we have one of the highest rates in the world.¹ Asthma and wheezing illnesses remain the most common reason for admission to hospital in children. Thankfully, the number of people who die from asthma is much lower than it was a few years ago, but tragedies still occur from time to time. We think that asthma deaths are less common nowadays because we are better at managing it, but most of asthma admissions could probably be avoided by better treatment too. The key is to keep asthma under control and get prompt treatment when it flares up.

What is Balloon Day?

Balloon day on 4th May is part of Asthma Awareness Week. Asthma still causes lots of ill health in New Zealand and much of this could be avoided with better advice and treatment. We want people to be more aware of asthma and what can be done about it. We want to see fewer children (and adults) admitted to hospital.

What does the Asthma Foundation want everyone to know about this disease?

- We are asking New Zealand to join us in keeping our kids out of hospital.
- We hear many stories first hand about what a scary, unsure time parents and caregivers have when their children go into hospital. Let alone what the children go through.
- Treating a person in a New Zealand hospital because of their asthma costs over a **\$1000 per day** (Ministry of Health figures).⁴
- We suspect that the majority of asthma attacks and hospital admissions could be prevented using the treatments that we already have. Stats from Waikato DHB for 2006 show that 97% of hospital admissions for asthma are avoidable.¹⁰
- Asthma and lower respiratory tract infections are the leading reason for children under 5 in this country being admitted to hospital.
- Asthma is very common in New Zealand. We are not sure why this is and we do not yet know how we can prevent asthma from developing in the first place. We do know that asthma can be controlled much better than it often is.

What do you hear from parents about when their child is hospitalised?

- That this is a very frightening time for both the child and their parents. These severe asthma attacks often seem to come on suddenly "out of the blue".
- Parents may be surprised at how quickly a child's asthma can deteriorate and they should not delay seeking medical help if their child is not responding to treatment.

What does research say about children with asthma being active?

- Exercise is very important for health and there is no good reason why children with asthma should not be fully active. There are good reasons that they should be.
- Many top athletes have asthma: they just have to manage their asthma better to allow them to exercise.
- Asthma must be well controlled so that children can play sport
- If you or your child finds that their asthma is stopping them from exercising, it is likely that their asthma is not well-controlled and you should discuss this with your doctor.

What does the Asthma Foundation advise people with asthma to do to have better control?

- Get an Action Plan - the action plans tell you about the recommended treatment for your child's asthma. More importantly they tell you how to recognise when their asthma is deteriorating and what to do about it. The plans are individualised to suit each child.
- We know that these plans can help people to manage their asthma better, which results in better health, fewer days of work or school, fewer admissions to hospital and hopefully fewer tragedies. The plans are filled out by parents and the child together with a health professional and can be downloaded at www.asthmafoundation.org.nz.
- Visit your asthma team regularly – it is important to build a relationship with your GP, practice nurse, asthma educator and pharmacist.
- Take your asthma medication as prescribed. It is important you understand how your inhalers work and how to use them.
- Be Smokefree

What is the main focus when it comes to research into respiratory illnesses?

We support a broad range of research into respiratory health. We are interested in any research on prevention, diagnosis or treatment of any respiratory disease. Obviously asthma is one of our main concerns, but we also support research on other lung diseases such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and respiratory infections, as well as research on preventing lung disease including smoking cessation and healthy housing.

References

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