FOCUS ON

THUNDERSTORM ASTHMA

phn MURRAY

An Australian Government Initiative

Thunderstorm asthma is thought to be triggered by high pollen levels and a certain type of thunderstorm. This uncommon combination can cause many people to develop life-threatening symptoms in a short period of time.

In regions with seasonal high concentrations of airborne pollen, thunderstorms can trigger asthma in people with grass pollen allergies, even if they have not had asthma before. These events are most likely to occur from early October through to late December, and move in a west to east direction across Victoria.

Impact of a Thunderstorm Asthma alert day on the primary care system	During a Thunderstorm Asthma alert day, primary care providers, specifically general practice and pharmacies, can experience a high number of patients presenting with anxiety from allergy symptoms and respiratory conditions, such as asthma attacks. Ambulance, hospital emergency departments, Priority Primary Care Centres (PPCCs) and Medicare Urgent Care Clinics (UCCs) can also expect to experience a higher number of presentations for these conditions.
Consider the role of your practice in an emergency	Emergency planning and response in general practice: RACGP's Thunderstorm-asthma_Fact-sheet.pdf (racgp.org.au)
Consider an asthma action plan with at risk patients	If a patient's asthma is triggered by pollens, and is worse in Spring and Summer, it is important that they have a current Asthma Action Plan
Know the pollen rating and risk of thunderstorm asthma	• AirRater allergy symptom tracker app • Bureau of Meteorology • Pollen Forecast • VicEmergency high-risk Thunderstorm Asthma/allergy day alerts
Keep up-to-date with alerts and information	• Subscribe to Victorian heat and thunderstorm asthma email alerts • Learn more about Thunderstorm Asthma HealthPathways • See Preparing patients for a disaster HealthPathways • See Post-natural disaster health HealthPathways
Management of at-risk people	Encourage people with asthma and allergic rhinitis to stay indoors and reduce exposure to outside air (turn off air conditioners and close windows) on high-risk Thunderstorm Asthma days and days of high pollen count. Ensure current Asthma Action Plans. Asthma preventer medication commences prior to high-risk season. People experiencing severe asthma symptoms such as chest tightness, wheeze, shortness of breath or cough should seek urgent medical assistance. Train staff in emergency asthma management, including non-clinical staff. Increase bronchodilators (Ventolin) and resuscitation medication on site and have appropriate equipment (spacers) available. Ensure a vulnerable population list of patients is ready and handy.

Update your emergency response documents	Preferably use the Emergency Response Planning Tool (free to general practices until December) and ensure staff are familiar with it. But if using a paper system, store a copy off site. This will not only help you to stay focused and respond under pressure but get your business back up and running more quickly.
Ensure emergency contact details are up-to-date	So that Murray PHN can assist in coordinating support with government agencies during an emergency, make sure to let us know who your emergency contacts are via your Quality Improvement Consultant or: primarycareresponse@murrayphn.org.au
Communicate service closures or impacts	Use social media and other platforms. Prepare a message or email to patients using appointment confirmation system or Pen CS if needed. Consider sending other important alerts, for example to patients with asthma during epidemic Thunderstorm Asthma days. Use Pen CS and CAT Plus recipes to identify relevant patient groups and send an SMS message to those patients who have not opted out. You will need to set up your account and ensure you have enough credits in the system to send the messages. **Inform Murray PHN of service closures or impacts: primarycareresponse@murrayphn.org.au**
Plan staffing	In the event of no or reduced access to your site or staff absences, consider alternate models of work, alternate sites and equipment needs (ERPT can guide you through these considerations): • Are the practitioners set up with ePrescribing so patients can obtain scripts immediately and remotely? Ensure paper scripts/prescribing pads are also available in the event that no internet is available. • Does the practice have an alternate contact number, or can you temporarily divert your practice number, so patients can call if the building is closed, and the phone system is inaccessible? • Can admin and clinical staff access your practice management and clinical software systems off site to facilitate remote models of care? • Ensure clinicians are able to create pathology and imaging requests if working remotely. • Have information available for VVED to share with patients.
Protect your data	Ensure that your practice software is backed up, ideally to the cloud, to reduce the risk of data loss. Upload patient information to My Health Record.
Join the emergency volunteer list	If you have capacity to support in an emergency event, register your interest using the online form.
Do emergency exercise training	Undertake mock training incidents to ensure staff are competent and aware of their roles in the event of an emergency.

Other useful links and resources to share with patients

• healthdirect: Thunderstorm asthma
• National Asthma Council Australia: Thunderstorm asthma
• Better Health Channel: Thunderstorm asthma
• Pollen Forecast
• My Health Record
• Alternative after hours and emergency care options

For further information or support please contact your local Quality Improvement Consultant, email: gpsupport@murrayphn.org.au or visit the general practice support page on our website