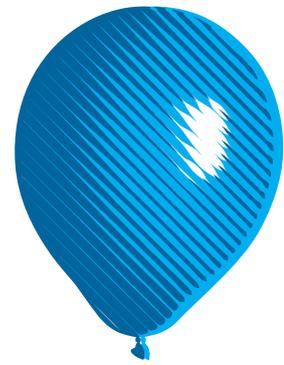


Sydney Smoke Impact Survey Results

June 2019



Asthma
Australia

In May 2019, there were five days where Sydney's air quality was considered hazardous. This was due to smoke from several hazard reduction burns conducted around the greater Sydney region.

Asthma Australia surveyed* over 500 people in the affected areas, to better understand the health and wellbeing impacts smoke had on people with asthma.

Knowing the impact

Survey participants

78% were people with asthma and 19% were carers of people with asthma. Of these, 78% reported taking their preventer medication every day¹, even when well, yet most still experienced asthma symptoms.

Normal air

The health and wellbeing aims for people with asthma centres around avoiding life-threatening episodes that require emergency management and achieving control of troublesome symptoms. The use of oral steroids, presentation at emergency departments and admission to hospital all constitute significantly severe episodes or flare-ups and are known risk factors for future life-threatening flare-ups (AAH, 2014). Air quality has a pivotal impact, contributing significantly to the health and wellbeing of people with asthma.

Hard to breathe

As a result of the hazard reduction burns, 81% of people surveyed reported experiencing difficulty breathing because of poor and hazardous air quality.



19%

(104 people) experienced an asthma emergency, including:

94 respondents (17%)
reported being prescribed oral
corticosteroid medication

17 respondents (3%)
reported attending a hospital
Emergency Department

10 respondents (2%)
reported being admitted
to hospital.



The most common non-emergency actions taken to address respiratory symptoms experienced were:

Existing preventer dose
was increased (35%)

Preventer medication
was prescribed (41%)

Increasing reliever dose for
a short period of time (65%).

“I am very angry about being sick and hospitalised caused by recent burnoffs. I take very good care of myself and am responsibly monitoring my asthma.”

“I haven’t used a ventolin puffer in years. I can’t go without it these past 3 days.”

¹Note: this result is in stark contrast to what we believe is the case according to population level PBS data on preventer medicine use and should be considered cautiously.

Baseline

Asthma remains in the **top 10 most burdensome diseases in Australia**, affecting people's ability to participate, resulting in lost opportunity and excessive overall cost, including the cost of premature death. It is the most burdensome disease for children aged 5 to 14 years (AIHW Burden of Disease report, 2019) and a leading reason children require days off school.

Actions taken

People told us they did the following in response to the poor air quality:



77%
(418 people) said they **stayed inside** with doors and windows closed

36% of respondents said they **avoided exercise**

27% of respondents said they **used** either an **air conditioner, air cleaner** or related device

Wider impacts

The poor air quality due to smoke caused wider disruption to people's lives:



21% were **sick** for longer than a week

28% had to **take sick leave** or work from home

22% had experienced **unexpected financial costs** due to extra medication or equipment needs

17% reported **kids had to miss school** or planned activities

54% couldn't participate in **planned sport** or social activities

“We can't stay indoors all the time. People have jobs to go to.”

* Survey participants were recruited via Asthma Australia's database if they had a registered postcode in Sydney and via Asthma Australia's social media platforms. Consumers were asked to provide their experiences during the poor air quality in May 2019 via an online survey.

Key Considerations

Prevention

As a priority, avoiding exposure to airborne triggers is one of the most important ways to prevent asthma episodes during these periods. This might include avoiding travel/daily commute, avoiding outdoor activities and/or sealing the house or car during poor air quality days. Effective use of prescribed preventer medication, starting 2-3 weeks before hazard reduction burn season is another important measure to build community and personal resilience to airborne triggers.

How early do people know about poor air quality?



84% of people responded that they **first know about poor air quality when they see smoke** in the air or via the media, too late to take preventative action.

While **13%** of people **reported registering for air quality early warning systems**, only 3% of respondents reported that they first find out about smoke this way.



“Give us PLENTY OF NOTICE. Myself and a my daughter could not breathe...it was VERY VERY scary not being able to breathe.”

Hazard Reduction Burn Season Awareness

42% of respondents said hazard reduction burning season **was not on their radar** and did not make specific preparations.

Those who did prepare reported:

Always carrying their blue reliever (52%)

Registering for air quality early warning systems (13%)

Beginning to take their prescribed preventer medication (22%)

Purchasing an air cleaner, filter or air conditioner (9%)

The **top 3** actions taken to reduce exposure to smoke once it was present were:

Staying inside with doors and windows closed (77%)

Avoiding exercise (36%)

Staying home from work or school (17%)



What did people say needs to happen?

Asthma Australia's survey highlights the significant impact that prolonged periods of smoke and poor air quality has on the health and lives of people with asthma and their carers.

Respondents put forward their thoughts on what the ideal situation might look like, which we've summarised below:

- **Better coordinated public awareness** and educational information in the lead up to hazard reduction burning season, to highlight the impact smoke has on people with asthma and to help encourage preventative action.
- **Improved communication about burns** and when associated smoke impacts will occur with direct notification to people who may be impacted
- **Improved coordination and planning of burning practices** to stagger burns and ensure they do not result in prolonged periods of smoke exposure and poor air quality
- **Better understanding in the workforce of the impact smoke has on people with asthma** and the need for sick or carer's leave or working from home options.

“Some of the steps to take are impossible when burning off happens for 4 weeks or more during autumn...”

“...it does seem like inadequate weight is given to the health consequences of this activity.”



What people said:

“ I’m 36 weeks pregnant. My daughter and I both have asthma. No amount of forewarning could have prepared us for the smoke completely invading our home the way it did and there was zero relief for days due to the lack of wind. Our home was unliveable, without being able to relocate to my parent’s place till the smoke cleared I am incredibly concerned for what the outcome may have been.”

“ This is not good enough... the smoke wakes us with asthma in the middle of the night.”

“ Show some sympathy towards people with respiratory difficulties instead of just telling them to stay at home. It is completely unfair and ridiculous to expect us to put our lives on hold because we have asthma or similar problems. We have obligations to our families and to our employers too.”

“ Not doing so many burn offs at once in the same areas. We were surrounded by smoke several times. I understand they’re necessary, but it is hard for asthmatics.”

“ ...it feels like our health doesn’t matter.”

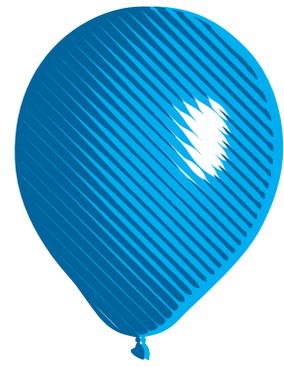
“ Perhaps better warnings as I wasn’t aware of any bushfires till I saw smoke settled all over my neighbourhood one morning. I would have carried water and a scarf to cover my nose and mouth had I known for the trip to work on public transport.”

“ Advanced notice of these events in mainstream public communications. The back burning events seemed to last several days in a row there was no reprieve could there be longer gaps between burns for a break for sufferers.”

“ I woke up in the middle of the night smelling the smoke and closed the window, but we are living in rented accommodation and the windows are drafty. I have got asthma as an adult after living in Australia for only 2 years. I am now in my 8th year and still am a bit clueless on when the back burning happens and what to do about it... I actually feel quite vulnerable here in Oz.”

Asthma Australia believes that effective bushfire management can take place without hazard reduction burn smoke putting the lives and wellbeing of vulnerable people in the community at risk.

We look forward to working with all stakeholders to find a way forward that protects property, people and our environment.



Asthma
Australia

**For more information
about asthma, call the
1800 ASTHMA Helpline
(1800 278 462) or visit
asthmaaustralia.org.au**