

|  |
| --- |
| Epidemic thunderstorm asthma: Information for community pharmacies |
| September 2025 |
|  |

# Overview

Grass pollen season (1 October to 31 December) brings an increase in asthma and hay fever and the chance of thunderstorm asthma. Thunderstorm asthma is thought to be triggered by an uncommon combination of high pollen levels and a certain type of thunderstorm Grass pollen grains get swept up in the wind and carried for long distances; some can burst open and release tiny particles that are concentrated in the wind gusts that come just before a thunderstorm. These particles are small enough to be breathed deep into the lungs and can rapidly trigger asthma symptoms, even in people who have never had asthma before. When a large number of people develop asthma symptoms over a short period of time it is known as epidemic thunderstorm asthma.

Community pharmacies have an important role to play in supporting good asthma and hay fever management, which not only improves quality of life but also reduces the risk of asthma exacerbations, including those related to epidemic thunderstorm asthma events.

# What should pharmacists do?

## Preparing your pharmacy and staff

* Ensure you have additional stocks of salbutamol inhalers and non-static spacers over spring.
* Ensure all staff are familiar with epidemic thunderstorm asthma and asthma first aid[[1]](#footnote-1)
* Display first aid instructions in a prominent place and make epidemic thunderstorm asthma information brochures and posters available, noting these are available in a range of community languages.[[2]](#footnote-2).
* Check the daily epidemic thunderstorm asthma forecast every day during the grass pollen season (typically 1 October through 31 December). Consider staying open later on high-risk forecast days.
* Be prepared for possible increased demand for asthma reliever medication, and advice and support for asthma treatment. Consider keeping a special kit ready with spacers and salbutamol puffers for emergency reserve use and ensure staff are prepared to respond.
* Have capacity to record contact details of people in the pharmacy that present with asthma during an event, including clients, visitors and staff, in a manner that can be easily retrieved if required.

## Preparing clients for the risk of epidemic thunderstorm asthma

People at risk of thunderstorm asthma include those with current, past or undiagnosed asthma and/or springtime hay fever. The risk is even higher for people who have both asthma and hay fever, especially if their asthma is poorly controlled.

### Clients who attend with asthma

* Ask clients if they have an up-to-date asthma action plan and whether it includes information on epidemic thunderstorm asthma. If they don’t yet have a plan or if it has been more than a year since it was last reviewed, recommend clients see their GP. Remind clients of the need to take asthma medication as prescribed by their doctor to ensure good control.
* For clients purchasing reliever medication, ask them if they are relying on reliever medication alone, and if appropriate, advise them of treatment options available in line with the National Asthma Handbook and encourage them to see their GP for review of their care, to update their asthma action plan and make sure any associated hay fever is well managed.
* Ask clients if they also have hay fever, and if so, provide advice on hay fever management (see below).
* Ask clients whether they are aware of epidemic thunderstorm asthma and advise that they are at increased risk, and that having poor control of asthma or both asthma and hay fever, increases the risk further.
* Remind clients of the need to carry reliever medication in the grass pollen season and provide support if needed to ensure clients know how to use it (ideally with a spacer).
* Remind clients to be alert to and act on the development of asthma symptoms as explained in their asthma action plan if they have one, or if they don’t, to use asthma first aid. Encourage clients to ensure that their family and friends also know asthma first aid so that they can assist if required. Direct clients to asthma first aid resources.[[3]](#footnote-3)
* Encourage clients to check the epidemic thunderstorm asthma forecast during the grass pollen season, via the VicEmergency or Melbourne pollen website or app.
* Advise clients to avoid storms in the grass pollen season, especially the wind gusts that come before the storm, and to plan their day to stay out of them.
* Share epidemic thunderstorm asthma resources, such as the thunderstorm asthma brochure, which is available in a range of community languages, or direct clients to the thunderstorm asthma information on the Better Health Channel (including via promotion through social media)[[4]](#footnote-4).

### Clients who attend for management of seasonal allergic rhinitis (springtime hay fever)

* Provide advice on effective hay fever management and work with clients to optimise symptom control, including consideration of intra nasal corticosteroids.
* Complete allergic rhinitis treatment plans[[5]](#footnote-5) and provide them to your clients.
* For those with asthma as well, ask about management (see above).
* For those with no prior diagnosis of asthma, ask if they ever get symptoms of asthma (such as wheezing, shortness of breath, a feeling of tightness in the chest or a persistent cost) as asthma commonly accompanies hay fever. If so, they could have undiagnosed asthma and should be encouraged to see their GP for investigation and diagnosis.
* For clients with current, past or undiagnosed asthma or hay fever, ask them whether they are aware they are at increased risk of epidemic thunderstorm asthma.
* Encourage clients to check the epidemic thunderstorm asthma forecast during the grass pollen season, via the VicEmergency or Melbourne pollen website or app.
* Advise clients to avoid storms in the grass pollen season, especially the wind gusts that come before the storm, and to plan their day to stay out of them.
* Describe an asthma attack and remind clients to be alert to and act on such an event, including using asthma first aid and to follow up with their GP. Encourage clients to ensure that their family and friends also know asthma first aid so that they can assist if required. Direct clients to asthma first aid resources.[[6]](#footnote-6)
* Advise clients that they should have reliever medication appropriately available during the grass pollen season (and know that they can purchase it from the pharmacy without a prescription).
* Share epidemic thunderstorm asthma resources, such as the thunderstorm asthma brochure, which is available in a range of community languages, or direct clients to the thunderstorm asthma information on the Better Health Channel (including via promotion through social media)[[7]](#footnote-7).

# Further information

* [Thunderstorm asthma: Prepare your patients for spring](https://www.nationalasthma.org.au/living-with-asthma/resources/health-professionals/information-paper/thunderstorm-asthma-prepare-your-patients-for-spring) pharmacist resource <https://www.nationalasthma.org.au/living-with-asthma/resources/health-professionals/information-paper/thunderstorm-asthma-prepare-your-patients-for-spring>
* [Thunderstorm asthma information paper for health professionals](https://www.nationalasthma.org.au/living-with-asthma/resources/health-professionals/information-paper/thunderstorm-asthma) <https://www.nationalasthma.org.au/living-with-asthma/resources/health-professionals/information-paper/thunderstorm-asthma>
* [Vic Emergency thunderstorm asthma forecast](%3A%20https%3A/emergency.vic.gov.au/prepare/#thunderstorm-asthma-forecast) <https://emergency.vic.gov.au/prepare/#thunderstorm-asthma-forecast>
* [Melbourne pollen](https://www.melbournepollen.com.au/) website <https://www.melbournepollen.com.au/> and app
* Better Health Channel [Thunderstorm asthma community resources](https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/thunderstorm-asthma) <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/thunderstorm-asthma>.

|  |
| --- |
| To receive this document in another format, phone 1300 761 874, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email the Climate and Health Team, <climate.publichealth@health.vic.gov.au>.Authorised and published by the Victorian Government, 1 Treasury Place, Melbourne.© State of Victoria, Australia, Department of Health, September 2025.Available at [Epidemic thunderstorm asthma – resources for health professionals](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/resources-for-health-professionals) <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/resources-for-health-professionals> |

1. Asthma first aid information is available from the [National Asthma Council](https://www.nationalasthma.org.au/asthma-first-aid) <<https://www.nationalasthma.org.au/asthma-first-aid>>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Thunderstorm asthma community resources are available from Better Health Channel <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/thunderstorm-asthma>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Asthma first aid information is available from the [National Asthma Council](https://www.nationalasthma.org.au/asthma-first-aid) <<https://www.nationalasthma.org.au/asthma-first-aid>>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thunderstorm asthma community resources are available from Better Health Channel <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/thunderstorm-asthma>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy (ASCIA): <https://www.allergy.org.au/patients/allergic-rhinitis-hay-fever-and-sinusitis/allergic-rhinitis-treatment-plan> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Asthma first aid information is available from the [National Asthma Council](https://www.nationalasthma.org.au/asthma-first-aid) <<https://www.nationalasthma.org.au/asthma-first-aid>>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Thunderstorm asthma community resources are available from Better Health Channel <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/thunderstorm-asthma>. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)