



Clinical Practice Guidelines: Respiratory/Asthma

Policy code	CPG_RE_AS_0120
Date	January, 2020
Purpose	To ensure consistent management of patients with asthma.
Scope	Applies to Queensland Ambulance Service (QAS) clinical staff.
Health care setting	Pre-hospital assessment and treatment.
Population	Applies to all ages unless stated otherwise.
Source of funding	Internal – 100%
Author	Clinical Quality & Patient Safety Unit, QAS
Review date	January, 2023
Information security	UNCLASSIFIED – Queensland Government Information Security Classification Framework.
URL	https://ambulance.qld.gov.au/clinical.html

While the QAS has attempted to contact all copyright owners, this has not always been possible. The QAS would welcome notification from any copyright holder who has been omitted or incorrectly acknowledged.

All feedback and suggestions are welcome. Please forward to: Clinical.Guidelines@ambulance.qld.gov.au

Disclaimer

The Digital Clinical Practice Manual is expressly intended for use by QAS paramedics when performing duties and delivering ambulance services for, and on behalf of, the QAS.

The QAS disclaims, to the maximum extent permitted by law, all responsibility and all liability (including without limitation, liability in negligence) for all expenses, losses, damages and costs incurred for any reason associated with the use of this manual, including the materials within or referred to throughout this document being in any way inaccurate, out of context, incomplete or unavailable.

© State of Queensland (Queensland Ambulance Service) 2020.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives V4.0 International License

You are free to copy and communicate the work in its current form for non-commercial purposes, as long as you attribute the State of Queensland, Queensland Ambulance Service and comply with the licence terms. If you alter the work, you may not share or distribute the modified work. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.en>

For copyright permissions beyond the scope of this license please contact: Clinical.Guidelines@ambulance.qld.gov.au

Asthma is an obstructive respiratory disease characterised by chronic airway inflammation, bronchial hyperresponsiveness and intermittent airway narrowing.^[1] In clinical practice, it is defined by the presence of both respiratory symptoms (e.g. wheeze, dyspnoea, chest tightness or cough) and excessive variation in lung function.^[2,3]

Asthma is estimated to affect 11% of Australia's population and is prevalent in both paediatric and adult cohorts.^[4] Typically, the clinical features of asthma may lay dormant when well managed however episodic exacerbations may occur in response to:^[5-6]

- Allergen or irritant exposure
- Exercise
- Respiratory (viral) infections
- Poor compliance with prescribed medications
- Extreme weather events ('thunderstorm asthma').

There is no standardised criteria or single test that can be used to diagnose asthma; diagnosis is probability driven and based on:

- Respiratory symptoms
- Variation in expiratory airflow
- Physical examination
- Past medical history
- Exclusion of other diagnoses

Clinical features



- Wheeze
- Dyspnoea
- Chest tightness or cough
- Tachypnoea
- Tachycardia
- Accessory muscle usage
- Diaphoresis
- Cyanosis (late sign)

Acute asthma is classified into three severity categories:

1. Mild/moderate
2. Severe or
3. Life-threatening.

Clinical features (cont.)

Clinical Feature	Mild/Moderate	Severe (any of the following)	Life-threatening (any of the following)
Conscious State	Alert	Altered	Altered or unconscious
General Appearance	Mildly anxious	Distressed, agitated	Exhausted, catatonic
Speech	Sentences	Words	Unable to speak
Ventilatory Rate	< 25/min in adults ≤ 30/min in paediatrics > 5 years ≤ 40/min in paediatrics 2–5 years	> 25/min in adults > 30/min in paediatrics > 5 years > 40/min in paediatrics 2–5 years	Silent chest
Ventilatory Rhythm	Slightly prolonged expiratory phase	Marked prolonged expiratory phase	Marked prolonged expiratory phase, no respiratory pause
Ventilatory Effort	Accessory muscle use	Accessory muscle use, intercostal retraction, tracheal tugging	Poor respiratory effort; respiratory exhaustion
Skin	Pale	Pale, sweating	Pale, sweating, cyanosis (late sign)
Pulse Rate	≤ 110/min in adults ≤ 120/min in paediatrics > 5 years ≤ 140/min in paediatrics 2–5 years	> 110/min in adults > 120/min in paediatrics > 5 years > 140/min in paediatrics 2–5 years	Hypotension/bradycardia, arrhythmia
Breath Sounds	Expiratory wheeze	Expiratory wheeze, inspiratory wheeze	Expiratory wheeze, inspiratory wheeze,
O₂ Saturation	90–94%	< 90%	< 88%



Risk assessment

- Respiratory symptoms such as dyspnoea and wheezing are non-specific indications of asthma. Consider differential diagnoses such as cardiac failure, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, foreign body or smoke inhalation in patients with no prior history of asthma.
- Pulse oximetry is not a reliable indicator of asthma severity and cannot be used to determine improvement in clinical condition.
- Patients presenting with acute asthma may deteriorate rapidly without any warning of sudden clinical decline.
- If IPPV is required, care should be taken to ensure the patient is not over-ventilated by allowing for a prolonged expiratory phase.



Additional information

A thorough patient history is important when managing acute asthma presentations. Pertinent questioning should determine:

- Previous asthma history – age of onset, frequency and severity of symptoms, number of previous hospital presentations in the last 12 months, previous ICU admissions
- Asthma triggers (if known)
- Cause of current episode (if known)
- Onset of symptoms (prolonged episodes may indicate exhaustion)
- Current prescribed medications (e.g. reliever, preventer, steroids)
- Concomitant medical conditions

