

Depression and asthma

This factfile covers:

- Introduction
- What is depression?
- Is depression making your asthma worse?
- Is your asthma making you depressed?
- Concerns about medicines
- Things that might help
- Where you can find out more.

Introduction

This factfile aims to outline some of the issues you might come across if you are living with asthma and depression.

Whether it is your asthma that is depressing you, or depression which is impacting on your asthma, we hope that reading this factfile will be a small but helpful step in the right direction and will give you some starting points towards feeling well again.

Many people with asthma, depression, or both, respond well to treatment and there is a lot of support available to you. The organisations listed at the end of this factfile can offer you further help and advice.

What is depression?

‘I think depression, like asthma, is often misunderstood. People think depression is just feeling a bit sad and asthma just goes away with a few puffs of Ventolin.’
Francis

If you are feeling depressed you are not alone. One in five people in the UK is affected by depression at some point in their lives.

People often use the word depression to describe feeling a bit low or fed up. True depression, though, is a more serious and prolonged feeling of sadness, and hopelessness. You might find everyday activities hard to cope with or have physical symptoms such as sleeplessness, a loss of energy, or muscle tension.

Depression often goes hand in hand with anxiety and can be triggered by divorce, money worries, or redundancy. Sometimes depression has a hormonal source, post natal depression for example. For some people lack of natural light in the winter means they suffer from seasonal depression or seasonal affective disorder (SAD). Others experience depression following bereavement.

If you find yourself ticking several of the symptoms on the depression checklist below you should seek help. Talk to someone about how you feel, perhaps a partner or a friend. It is important to seek help if you are worried about any ongoing feelings or symptoms, particularly if they are impacting on your everyday life.

You should also remember that checking your symptoms against a list is useful but is not a substitute for seeing a healthcare professional. By assessing your clinical and family history your doctor is best placed to determine if your symptoms add up to a diagnosis of depression.

Depression and asthma

Depression checklist

- Tired, lack of energy
- Not sleeping well
- Tearful
- Not wanting to be with people
- Not wanting to do things
- Eating, drinking or sleeping more or less than usual
- Using alcohol or drugs, or smoking more than usual
- Finding it hard to cope with everyday things
- Feeling restless or agitated and anxious
- Not liking or taking care of yourself

Is depression making your asthma worse?

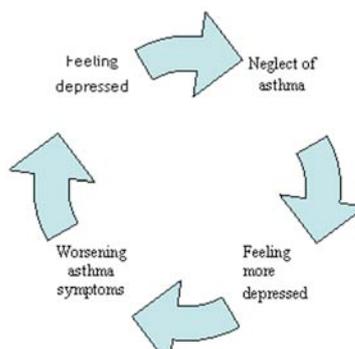
‘When I get low my asthma gets worse, then I feel more depressed because my asthma is bad, and it affects my sleep, and my chest. The whole thing becomes a vicious circle.’ Jane

Living with a long-term condition can have its demands; when you throw depression into the mix it is even more challenging.

Strong emotions – stress, fear, anxiety, and long-term depression – can sometimes trigger asthma. Good emotional health helps to guard against asthma episodes.

It is all too easy to get caught up in a vicious circle: you feel depressed, depression leaves you feeling tired and unmotivated to look after your asthma properly, your asthma gets worse, having to put up with asthma symptoms makes you feel more worried and more depressed – and so it goes on.

If this experience sounds familiar then you need to find ways to break the cycle.





Depression and asthma

If you are experiencing more asthma symptoms speak to your asthma nurse and make sure you are following a personal asthma action plan. Feeling more in control of your asthma is one less thing to be depressed and anxious about.

Talk to your doctor about how you feel as well as discussing your physical symptoms so that you can get the all round help and support you need. Mental health needs are easily masked by the physical needs of a long-term condition like asthma. Being open about how you are feeling is an important step in dealing with the depression, and dealing with the depression will help with your asthma.

Often people find it difficult to admit that they are not coping, but it is worth remembering that depression, along with anxiety, is an extremely common mental health problem and your doctor will be very familiar with it.

Is your asthma making you depressed?

'I think a common feeling is that you feel somehow ashamed of having asthma. You take the inhaler where no-one can see you, pretend you're fine when you're not and are embarrassed by the wheezing noise.' Caroline

'I was new to a job when my asthma kicked off last year. I've managed to hold it together with leave and minimal sick leave. My new boss is the first one I've discussed it with for the whole of my working life.' Lisa

Everyone reacts differently to any illness or long-term condition. For many people asthma is something they feel they can manage well and it doesn't impact negatively on their mental health. For others having asthma can result in anxiety, fear and even shame. Some studies suggest that depression is two to three times more common in people with chronic illnesses or long-term conditions.

Sometimes asthma impacts on other areas of your life, such as work, where anxiety around taking sick leave, missing out on opportunities to progress, and even around losing your job altogether, can take its toll on your emotional health. For some people having asthma deters them from applying for jobs.

Asthma UK has developed a work charter which outlines what you have a right to expect from your employer in relation to your asthma. This will help you in any discussions you might have at work around minimising asthma triggers and sick leave. If you do need to stay off work there are benefits you are entitled to.

An asthma diagnosis can present challenges, however with good support most people will be able to manage their asthma without it disrupting daily life. There are many people with asthma who lead full and active lives – working, socialising and staying well and active.

If, however, leading a full and active life seems like a far off goal to you right now, you should seek out some specialist support for your asthma – don't resign yourself



Depression and asthma

to poor asthma control. If you think your asthma treatments aren't working you should see your asthma nurse to make sure you are using your treatments properly and to see if the dose or the medicine itself needs adjusting.

Concerns about medicines

'I have no history of any mental health problems however the GP and consultant have made me feel more comfortable after stating that my depression could be to do with the steroid tablets.' David

Anti-depressants

National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidance suggests that a non-pharmaceutical approach is the best initial approach to help someone with depression, particularly where there are co-existing long-term conditions. This may mean you are recommended counselling or a similar psychological therapy in the first instance.

Depending on the severity of the depression, or if the psychological therapy is not working for you, your doctor may discuss short-term use of anti depressants. These can be invaluable in aiding people take the first step in helping them to manage depression.

If you are worried about the side-effects of anti depressants, or concerned that the new medicine will conflict with your current asthma treatment, talk through your concerns with your doctor. You should also ask how long it will take for any new treatments to take effect, and how long you will need to take them. Never come off your medicine suddenly without medical advice.

In many cases the best treatment is considered to be a mix of psychological therapy and use of prescribed anti depressants with on-going evaluation from your doctor.

Herbal treatments

Just because a medicine is herbal and available over the counter doesn't mean it is safe in all cases.

The herbal medicine St John's Wort, for example, is used in some cases of mild depression, but it can interact with some other medicines, including those for asthma. It should not be taken alongside prescribed anti depressants.

You should talk to your doctor or pharmacist for advice before taking herbal medicines.



Depression and asthma

Asthma medicines

Some people report that their asthma medicine makes them feel more depressed, or that they have mood swings as a result of taking it.

Depression can occasionally be a side effect of taking steroid tablets, but these side effects are often eased as the dose of the steroid tablets is reduced or discontinued.

Using high dose steroid tablets long-term can have other side effects. Sometimes these can result in people feeling depressed: weight gain, moon face (a bloated face) and thin skin are all known side effects. This is why it is important to keep your asthma in check to make it less likely that these treatments will be needed. The decision to prescribe steroid tablets is not taken lightly – they will only be prescribed when the asthma is severe enough to warrant them. You should attend regular check ups and look to stay on regular inhaled steroids if you need them, reducing the dose to the lowest safest level when possible.

It is understandable that if you are already depressed you will be concerned about using any medicine with depression as a side effect, or with other side effects you will have to deal with. However, you should consider committing to taking any recommended asthma medicine long enough to see an improvement, as little as five days in the case of some steroid tablets. To cut a course of steroids early may mean you actually need more in the long run.

If you still have misgivings about taking your medicine, talk to your asthma nurse who may be able to find a suitable alternative or call the Asthma UK Adviceline.

You should not stop taking your asthma medicines without consulting your doctor.

Things that might help

'I have had difficulties at work, having time off with both asthma and depression but through help from my GP, asthma nurse, Asthma UK and the union this was eventually resolved. Through exercise (walking, the gym, swimming and aerobic classes) I have reduced my weight and noticed a significant improvement in my asthma.' David

1. Look after yourself

When you are depressed it is sometimes hard to keep in mind the things you need to do to keep healthy. It is easy to slip into feeling unmotivated and sluggish.

Paying attention to your general health and well-being is a vital part of any self help routine to recover from depression and to build up resilience to future episodes. It is also good for your asthma.



Depression and asthma

Keep an eye on the basic rules of good physical health:

- Don't smoke

If you are a smoker you might notice that you smoke more when you are depressed. Smoking doesn't help either asthma or depression and can make you more stressed and anxious. There are groups, and products, to help you give up smoking altogether. Ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist for advice on giving up.

- Eat well

A healthy balanced diet can keep your mood on an even keel. Avoid too much sugar, processed food, caffeine, and alcohol which can have adverse effects on your mood. Keep to regular meal times and avoid eating too much, or skipping meals. You could try keeping a food and mood diary – log what you eat and how you feel over a period of time.

- Keep active

Exercise releases endorphins which are chemicals in the brain that promote a happy mood. Start small - any physical activity you can introduce into your day will bring its benefits both to your mood and to your asthma, whether it's a short walk, dancing to the radio, or doing some housework or gardening. You could consider swimming, yoga, perhaps even joining a class. Asthma need not be an obstacle to exercise but if you are unsure what kind of exercise to take up, or how much you are capable of doing, speak to your doctor first.

2. Talk about how you feel

Talking therapies play a key role in dealing with depression. You might find that talking to friends or family, or sharing how you feel with others on online forums, is enough to help you.

You could also consider therapies such as counselling or psychotherapy. These can give you the strategies you need to understand and manage your depression. Your doctor can refer you to free counselling or psychotherapy; if your depression is quite severe you may be able to get a referral to a psychologist.

There are websites and health centres offering counselling although you will have to pay for these. If you do decide to find a counsellor yourself make sure it is someone registered by a national body such as the British Association of Counsellors and Psychotherapists.

3. Try relaxation techniques and complementary therapies

Several studies in the UK and overseas have shown that breathing training and relaxation taught by a physiotherapist can reduce asthma symptoms and improve quality of life. The Buteyko method also produces similar benefits. These kinds of exercises may also help support general relaxation and lessen some of the physical tension that builds up as a result of ongoing stress and depression.



Depression and asthma

Although most complementary therapies do not have the evidence base that medicines do they nevertheless have a good track record for supporting people with depression and many people with depression like to give them a try. Massage for example, and Reiki, might help restore emotional balance for some people.

Ask in your local health centre, health food shop, or look on the internet to find out what is available near you. If you are considering having any complementary therapies speak to your doctor first.

4. Take one step at a time

When you are dispirited and tired it is difficult to find the momentum to do anything; it can feel impossible to make a start.

Try keeping a log of everything you do in a day, even breaking it down into hours. When you are very depressed even small steps like making a cup of tea or going to the corner shop can feel like big achievements. Make a note of what you did and which things had a positive effect on your mood.

Longer term you could consider joining a group or learning something new. Keeping physically and socially active will benefit your asthma too.

Moving away from depression is not an easy thing, but taking small steps at a time, and keeping an open mind about the support available to you, will eventually lead you towards a better outlook.



Depression and asthma

Where you can find out more

For your depression or mental well-being needs:

- MIND – mind.org.uk – information line for types of mental distress, therapies etc.
- Be Mindful – bemindful.co.uk – an online campaign run by the Mental Health Foundation – mentalhealth.org.uk.
- Samaritans – samaritans.org – 24 hour confidential, emotional support T 08457 90 90 90 E: jo@samaritans.org.
- Depression Alliance – depressionalliance.org – specialising in depression, has information about support groups and five ways to well-being.
- Aware Defeat Depression Helpline – 08451 202961; help@aware-ni.org – information and support for people in Northern Ireland and lots of self help tips: aware-ni.org.
- British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) – bacp.co.uk – has a list of counsellors in your area.
- UK Council for Psychotherapy – psychotherapy.org.uk – will provide a list of psychotherapists.

For your asthma:

- Asthma UK Adviceline – T 0800 121 62 44. Talk in confidence to one of our asthma nurse specialists about your asthma, and how it is making you feel. You can also email an asthma nurse through asthma.org.uk/adviceline
- Asthma UK website – asthma.org.uk. Find out how others are dealing with asthma and depression on our forums
- Expert Patient Programme – expertpatients.co.uk - launched in 2002 this helps patients with long-term conditions to take control of their lives.
- For Breathe Easy Support groups, to share your concerns with others, go to the British Lung Foundation – lunguk.org
- Benefits Enquiry Line – T: 0800 88 22 00 – offers general advice and information for disabled people and carers on the range of benefits available: direct.gov.uk/disability-money
- Ask your doctor or asthma nurse for a personal asthma action plan and talk to them about your medicines, and how to avoid an asthma attack.



Asthma UK Adviceline

Ask an asthma
nurse specialist

0800 121 62 44

asthma.org.uk/adviceline

Asthma UK website

Read the latest independent
advice and news on asthma

asthma.org.uk

Asthma UK publications

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and other materials with
independent, specialist
information on every
aspect of asthma

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info@asthma.org.uk

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