



Emergency Preparation for Primary Care

Thunderstorm asthma

Thunderstorm asthma is asthma triggered by a mixture of grass pollen in the air and thunderstorm conditions. Symptoms include shortness of breath, chest tightness, wheezing and persistent coughing. The risk is highest in adults who are sensitive to grass pollen and have seasonal hay fever, even if they have not had asthma before.

Thunderstorm asthma can be life threatening. In Victoria potential thunderstorm asthma events are most likely to occur between October and late December and move in a west to east direction across the state.

Who is at risk?	People with seasonal hay fever, or current, past or undiagnosed asthma. The chance of thunderstorm asthma is highest for adults sensitive to grass pollen and who have seasonal hay fever (with or without known asthma). The worst outcomes are in people with poorly controlled asthma.
Impact of a thunderstorm asthma alert day on the primary care system	During the October to December grass pollen season, thunderstorm asthma alerts are broadcast across the VicEmergency system. On an alert day, primary care providers, specifically general practice and pharmacies, may see a larger than usual number of patients presenting with anxiety, allergy symptoms and respiratory conditions such as asthma attacks. Other services such as ambulance, hospital emergency departments and Medicare Urgent Care Clinics (UCCs) may also receive a high number of presentations.
Consider the role of your practice in an emergency	In relation to thunderstorm asthma risks, the RACGP suggests: • Display notices in your practice with facts and information about thunderstorm asthma emphasising that it can affect people with no prior history of asthma. • Consider developing an asthma action plan with patients who have allergic rhinitis or rye grass pollen allergy despite no known asthma. • Discuss and raise awareness of risks with patients who have asthma, allergic rhinitis, and rye grass pollen allergy and check that they have access to preventers and relievers as part of their asthma plan. • Alert reception and other practice staff when the risk of thunderstorm asthma increases. Discuss how to recognise patients who might be affected at reception.

	Form relationships with other health care organisations (such as hospital emergency departments and community health centres) prior to and during thunderstorms. Ensure roles and responsibilities are clarified.
Know the pollen rating and risk of thunderstorm asthma	Pollen and air quality ratings can be found using: The Australian Government Bureau of Meteorology Pollen Forecast AirRater App VicEmergency issue alerts on high-risk thunderstorm asthma and allergy days.
Keep up to date with alerts and information	Subscribe to the Department of Health's heat and thunderstorm asthma alerts
Management of at-risk people	- Encourage people with asthma and allergic rhinitis to stay indoors, close windows and turn off aircon on high-risk days. - Ensure people have a current Asthma Action Plan. - Start asthma preventer medication 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, including non-clinical staff, in emergency asthma management. - Store increased stocks of bronchodilators (such as Ventolin) and resuscitation medication on site, along with appropriate equipment such as spacers. - Keep a list of patients vulnerable to thunderstorm asthma ready and handy.
Plan for potential emergency roles	The size and scale of Melbourne's 2016 thunderstorm asthma emergency resulted in hospitals and ambulance transport being overwhelmed. Systems and protocols are now in place to lessen the chance of this happening again, but widespread dysfunction cannot be fully ruled out in the event of another massive outbreak. Should this happen, general practices may have to support and monitor thunderstorm asthma patients who might usually be transferred to hospitals. This may impact stocks of medications, such as bronchodilators, operating hours and staff rosters.
Other useful links and resources to share with patients	Thunderstorm asthma - healthdirect Thunderstorm asthma - National Asthma Council Australia Thunderstorm asthma - Better Health Channel My Health Record - Australian Digital health Agency Service Finder - healthdirect

General emergency planning and preparation	
Update your emergency response documents	The RACGP - Emergency Response Planning Tool (ERPT) is a cloud based, practical online tool that assists general practices to better prepare for, respond to and recover from the impacts of emergencies and pandemics. It guides users through a series of planning templates where critical information about the practice can be entered and saved. The information is used to create an emergency response plan which is individually tailored to the general practice. The customised plan is then saved and stored in the cloud and can also be printed as a hard copy resource at any time. This will not only help you to stay focused and respond under pressure but get your business back up and running more quickly. Access to the ERPT requires an annual subscription. There are a number of alternative options available to assist users to develop an Emergency Response Plan. Listed are just a few: • Check with your accreditation provider or on your accreditation portal for general practice specific templates. • Emergency plan template – Safe Work Australia • Develop an emergency plan – Business.gov.au
Communicate service closures or impacts	Use social media and other platforms. Consider using POLAR to identify patients at risk of thunderstorm asthma and send them an SMS message on high-risk days.
Clinical, management and referral advice for general practices	HealthPathways Melbourne pages for information on diagnosis, treatment and referrals: • Thunderstorm Asthma - HealthPathways Melbourne • Preparing Patients for a Disaster • Preparing a General Practice for a Disaster • General Practice Management During a Disaster • Post Natural Disaster Health
Join the emergency volunteer list	If you have capacity to support in an emergency event, record your interest using the Emergency Response Register.

Contact us

For more information or support email primarycare@nwmphn.org.au

We acknowledge the peoples of the Kulin nation as the Traditional Custodians of the land on which our work in the community takes place. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present.

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