

Breathe easier with the right support

Finding out you or someone you care for has chronic lung disease can be overwhelming. There are decisions to be made regarding treatment, lifestyle changes to adapt to and a future to contemplate that may look quite different to the one you had planned. It's not uncommon to feel distressed and even alone.

Lung disease affects millions of Australians. The Lung Foundation currently puts the number of people over the age of 40 with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), the second leading cause of avoidable hospital admissions in Australia, at one in seven.

The pulmonary rehabilitation program at Castlemaine Health helps people with lung disease feel more in control of their symptoms, manage their triggers and regain the best quality of life.

During the eight-week program, participants learn how to look after their lungs and best manage their conditions with diet, exercise and medication. They learn how to manage stress using relaxation techniques and mindfulness, and the best way to monitor and understand what's happening to their bodies. It's also an opportunity to connect with others going through a similar experience.

Castlemaine Health physiotherapist Melissa Wade says the program is all about empowering patients. Helping them feel capable of managing their condition and getting back to doing the things they enjoy.

According to the Lung Foundation, pulmonary rehabilitation is one of the best things you can do to improve your breathing and wellbeing. Helping reduce flare ups and keep you out of hospital.

"We can take a person from initial diagnosis right through to someone who has been living with their condition for many years," says Melissa.

"Research shows that if we can get people into the program after a discharge from hospital, their risk of a re-admission is significantly reduced."

The pulmonary rehabilitation program caters to people with:

- COPD - an umbrella term for a group of lung conditions including emphysema, chronic bronchitis and chronic asthma

- Pulmonary Arterial Hypertension (PAH)
- Bronchiectasis
- Idiopathic Pulmonary Fibrosis (IPF) and
- Lung cancer.

Di McPherson works with Castlemaine Health's HARP (Hospital Admission Risk Program) team, a one-on-one service that provides additional support for people living with chronic disease. This includes many participants in the pulmonary rehabilitation program.

"We provide education and support, help people recognise their triggers and symptoms, make sure they're keeping connected with their GP and specialists and check they have appropriate action plans in place," says Di.

"We also make sure medication is being taken correctly."

As it's now the peak time for seasonal asthma and allergic rhinitis (hay fever) Di says this is the right time to review asthma plans and check that medication for asthma and hay fever is in date and at hand, especially if you have lung disease.

"All the signs are pointing to a bad year for allergies and asthma with a heightened risk of thunderstorm asthma," she says.

According to the Department of Health and Human Services Victoria, data from thunderstorm asthma epidemics suggests the risk of asthma triggered by particular thunderstorms is highest in adults who are sensitised to grass pollen and have hay fever (with or without known asthma). The worst outcomes are seen in people with poorly controlled asthma.

"Appropriate prevention and good asthma and hay fever management is the best way to protect yourself," says Di.

"We're working with our clients to make sure they're on top of their asthma plans and their medications for both conditions, know how to use them and when. We'd encourage everyone in the community to do the same."

If you think you or someone you know could benefit from attending the pulmonary rehabilitation program or connecting with the HARP team speak to your GP about a referral or contact the Community Rehabilitation Centre at Castlemaine Health. (P) 5471 3555

(E) intake@castlemainehealth.org.au



Castlemaine Health physiotherapist Melissa Wade and nurse Di McPherson from the HARP team.



Lung disease impacts 7 million (almost 1 in 3) Australians.



Q&A

Q: What is thunderstorm asthma?

A: Thunderstorm asthma events are believed to be triggered by an uncommon combination of high grass pollen levels and a certain type of thunderstorm, causing pollen grains from grasses to be swept up in the wind and carried long distances. This causes the pollen to burst open and release tiny concentrated particles which get further into the airways and can trigger severe asthma symptoms.

Q: Who is at risk?

A: People who have hay fever (seasonal allergic rhinitis) related to grass pollen, asthma, a history of asthma or undiagnosed asthma are at increased risk. Even if you don't think you have asthma, don't ignore symptoms during a thunderstorm event, which can include wheezing, shortness of breath, feeling tight in the chest and persistent coughing.

Q: How can I check the risk?

A: The risk of an epidemic thunderstorm asthma event occurring is forecast daily during the Victorian grass pollen season (typically October 1 to December 31). For up to date information visit www.emergency.vic.gov.au or download the VicEmergency app.