

## **Keeping asthma under control**

There are nearly always several warning signs before a fatal asthmatic attack, Dr Pat Manning tells **Sheila O'Kelly**

Between 80 and 100 people die from acute asthmatic attacks in Ireland every year and Dr Pat Manning, consultant respiratory physician, says the two main contributory factors are:

- They are under-treated and not taking preventative treatment when they should be
- They rely too much on the reliever medication – if someone uses a reliever more than twice a week they should be reassessed.

### **What is the difference between preventer and reliever medication?**

Preventer medication is anti-inflammatory medication. These are primarily inhaled steroids and are the first-line treatment for people with symptomatic asthma. People who have regular asthma symptoms will need treatment on a daily basis to prevent the symptoms and enable them to lead as normal a life as possible, says Dr Manning.

The reliever medication (usually blue) is designed to relax the muscles during an attack and relieve the spasm in the airways.

Nowadays the reliever is often combined with a steroid or preventer treatment in a combined medication. This is because a longer acting reliever medication has been developed. Instead of lasting for three or four hours it can now last for 10-12 hours.

“The newer combined treatments such as Symbicort or Seretide are generally taken twice a day. This means we can give smaller doses of an inhaled steroid

and yet get the same amount of control of asthma. The reliever medication can then be taken in between if the patient develops symptoms,” says Dr Manning.

People who have asthma can run into trouble when they don't realise how bad their asthma is and don't adhere to their treatment. It is essential to be aware of what the danger signals are and what to do if someone's symptoms indicate that a severe attack may happen.

“Sometimes people, especially those with milder asthma, don't understand the importance of using their medication appropriately. Then they can run into trouble when they get a respiratory illness or have some other illness.

“Parents worry about steroids and the effects they will have on their children. They sometimes take their child off medication after a week or so when their symptoms have cleared up and then they wonder why the symptoms have come back again,” says Dr Manning.

### **What are the warning signals?**

Most people who have had a bad asthmatic attack have often had a warning that an attack is imminent. Warning signals are that asthma symptoms increase, particularly at night or early in the morning. They may also find that they need to use their reliever medication more frequently than they usually do. Dr Manning says that generally what happens in a bad attack is that:

- The symptoms become much more noticeable, particularly by parents of children
- The reliever medication does not work as quickly nor for as long as it should do.

In that situation the person with asthma often complains about:

- Tightness of the chest
- Difficulty with breathing
- Rapid breathing

- Difficulty completing sentences
- Their skin colour changing.

“These symptoms generally occur over a period of hours. So there is some time to do something about it. Generally if using the reliever medication does not work then they need help,” says Dr Manning.

If they need immediate help and they can’t get their local doctor to come and visit, they should go to an accident and emergency department very quickly, ringing an ambulance if necessary. “This is because there is medication and treatment that can be put in place rapidly,” says Dr Manning.

“The concern about delay is that these conditions can often progress and some patients can get very severely ill and may die from the condition,” says Dr Manning.

### **Seek help after five-10 minutes**

Dr Manning says that if someone has an asthma attack and gets no relief within five-10 minutes of using their reliever inhaler, they should get immediate medical help.

“Generally speaking even someone who has had mild asthma for five years can all of a sudden get very bad. I can see a ‘brittle’ asthmatic at 10 o’clock and they’re fine and at 12 o’clock they’re in intensive care. It’s rare, but it does happen.”

Dr Manning would like to see an easily available counselling service for the relatives of people who have died from asthma.

Everyone who has asthma should be reassessed every six months, said Dr Manning. “This is because asthma can vary and your treatment may need to be stepped up or stepped down. Sometimes new treatment will be available that will suit you better – the combined inhaler has been a boon for many people.

“It can help for people to think of asthma as a rash in the airways like eczema is a rash on the skin. The idea is to treat the rash so that it stays away and does not flare up,” says Dr Manning.

He recommends that people with asthma use the resources on the Asthma Society website which has very good information and is linked to [IrishHealth.com](http://IrishHealth.com). He also praises the society’s telephone support service. Practice nurses in GP surgeries are also very important for providing education to people with asthma, says Dr Manning.

“I would like people to be able to keep easily up to date with the research and the newer ways of looking at asthma. It would be good to see people confident enough to manage their own condition as much as possible,” says Dr Manning.