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Why your favourite perfume could trigger an asthma attack

Almost half of 5.4 million asthma sufferers in the UK find that perfume triggers their symptoms. We investigate why this is and what can be done to manage its effects.

The lung condition [asthma](#) is an inflammatory disease that causes the muscles around the airways to go into spasm, causing [shortness of breath](#), wheezing, chest tightness and [coughing](#). It can be triggered by multiple factors, including [infection](#), [hay fever](#), allergy or a change in weather. In the UK asthma affects one in every 11 people and one in five households.

The link between asthma and perfume

[Asthma UK](#) estimates that 2.5 million people in the UK find that fragrances such as perfumes or aerosols trigger their asthma symptoms, likely caused by particles in the air that are breathed in and irritate the airways. This makes them more inflamed and narrow, which can lead to wheezing, coughing, a tight chest, and a potentially life-threatening asthma attack.

"Some people with asthma also tell us that strong smells, such as scented candles, hand cream or paint, also trigger their asthma, but the mechanisms behind this are less clear," says Sonia Munde, head of Asthma UK's telephone helpline service, which offers support and health advice to people with the condition.

How to protect yourself

Asthma attacks hospitalise someone every 8 minutes; 185 people are admitted to hospital because of asthma attacks every day in the UK, and yet many of these cases could be prevented with an asthma management plan.

For example, if people notice a link between certain fragrances and a flare-up in their asthma symptoms, it's best to avoid these triggers altogether. In everyday life, this can be more difficult, so it's important to take [regular preventer medication](#), as prescribed by your doctor.

"This reduces and soothes the inflammation in people's airways, meaning they are less likely to react to asthma triggers and will reduce their risk of having an asthma attack," Munde explains.

Debbi Wood, 58, was diagnosed with occupational asthma 28 years ago and finds that as well as taking her inhalers daily, avoiding fragrances is crucial to avoiding an attack.

"I know my triggers - mainly perfume, smoke, changes in the weather and chlorine. I can avoid some of them - for instance, I don't walk past strong-smelling cosmetics shops or wear hand cream because the scents set off my coughing. If I go swimming, I can tell by the smell in the changing rooms whether there's too much chlorine in the water. If there is, I don't go swimming. I have to be flexible."

Confronting colleagues and friends

Every 10 seconds someone is having a potentially life-threatening asthma attack in the UK. It's important to communicate with friends and colleagues about asthma symptoms so that they know what is normal for you and what to do in the event of an attack. It will also help them to become more aware of wearing strong-smelling perfumes that could cause your asthma symptoms.

"People may find it helpful to talk to their friends and colleagues about how fragrances can affect their asthma," says Munde. "The best way to approach this is to be as honest as possible; try explaining what it feels like when your asthma is triggered by perfume or explain how serious an asthma attack can be.

"If people with asthma tell their line manager or HR department about their asthma, they can make 'reasonable adjustments' to ensure people are protected from their asthma triggers. This could mean that they consider other options for air fresheners in the workplace if people know that they trigger their asthma, or a desk change if they sit next to someone wearing perfume that triggers their symptoms," she says.

Wood spent seven years on forced medical retirement because of her asthma symptoms. For a quarter of a million people with severe asthma, even the simplest tasks can feel like a marathon, never mind going to work. However, asthma doesn't have to stop you getting on with your life.

As Wood explains: "Gradually I became better at managing my asthma and returned to work part-time. I'm now working full-time for a local authority and my employers couldn't be more supportive. They let me work from home if I'm unwell. After a colleague came in after a gym session wearing lots of deodorant, which triggered an asthma attack, my boss immediately sent out an email banning perfumes and sprays."

"The main thing I've learned about managing this condition is that I need to pace myself - overdoing it makes me unwell. That's the key to staying as well as possible with asthma, I think - going with the flow depending on what my body's telling me at that particular time."

For more information on managing your asthma triggers, visit [Asthma UK](#).

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