

Asthma and Allergies

Information about Asthma

Asthma is a long-term respiratory condition that affects the airways - the tubes that carry air in and out of the lungs. When a person with asthma comes into contact with something that irritates their sensitive airways even more (an asthma trigger), it causes their body to react in three ways:

- the muscles around the walls of the airways tighten so that the airways become narrower
- the lining of the airways becomes inflamed and starts to swell
- sticky mucus or phlegm sometimes builds up, which can narrow the airways even more.

These reactions cause the airways to become narrower and irritated, making it difficult to breathe and leading to asthma symptoms such as chest tightness, wheezing, or coughing.

Triggers are varied, and can include: colds/flu; indoor environment; pollution; smoking and second hand smoke; alcohol; emotions; stress and anxiety.

Information about Allergies

An allergy is a medical condition in which exposure to a trigger activates a harmful immune response. The immune response, called an allergic reaction, occurs because the immune system triggers attacks on normally harmless substances. The proteins that trigger the reaction are called allergens.

The symptoms of an allergic reaction can range from mild (itchy mouth, a few hives) to severe (throat tightening, difficulty breathing). Anaphylaxis is a serious allergic reaction that is sudden in onset and can cause death.

Allergies include: certain foods (including milk, eggs, nuts, soy, seafood, some fruits); bee/wasp stings; some chemicals (such as in cleaning products, carpets, or the environment); certain plants, including pollen; pets; mould; latex; medication/drugs.

Implications for study

Most students manage their asthma or allergies well. However, it can be difficult for an individual to predict whether they will encounter specific triggers until they are fully immersed in their new study or living environment. Asthma can be triggered by new environmental factors and by stress, so the student may have a sudden increase in symptoms when starting/transitioning to university. It could be extremely unsettling or frightening to feel like a previously well managed condition is becoming unstable at a point when the student is trying to cope with moving away from home, making new friends, and getting to grips with the academic demands of university life.

It might become difficult for the student to visit particular locations due to the presence of triggers or to meet deadlines if symptoms are making them feel unwell. Should a student become unwell

though an allergic reaction, they might feel lightheaded, clammy or wheezy initially before suddenly deteriorating. This could happen during a lecture or tutorial following a meal, as these reactions can come on very rapidly. Students with severe allergies need to have a risk assessment and health emergency plan in place as they are likely to carry the medication epinephrine, in the form of an Epi-pen. This is an auto-injectable dose of adrenaline, which can save a student's life whilst they wait for an ambulance to arrive. Key staff and usually a few close friends need to be aware of the location of the Epi-pen to be able to pass it to the student during an attack.

Guidance for working with students with asthma or allergies

The following notes highlight factors to take into consideration when working with students with asthma or allergies, and suggest practical action and informal adjustments which might be made.

Communication

- Consider taking an appropriate opportunity to talk to the student about their disability. Ask them discretely about the impact of their disability and discuss with them what might be helpful (never ask or expect a student to discuss personal or medical details with you).
- Assist students to develop a collaborative plan for dealing with health emergencies, and for managing transition periods when moving between home and university; encourage them to share their plan with relevant people (providing guidance on who this might include), and to keep it updated after any medical review; having plans in place will build confidence on both sides.
- Consider keeping in touch more regularly than you would otherwise, particularly during assessment or examination periods, due to the potential increase of symptoms in response to stress; encourage students to proactively manage stress/symptoms through links with the college nurse/GP, the University Counselling Service, and by being mindful of their physical health through diet and exercise.
- Students who are in catered accommodation might need strict awareness and adherence by catering staff to avoid food being contaminated with an allergen.

Environment

- Assess teaching rooms and living spaces to identify any known triggers and consider whether any adaptations could be made to prevent problems (e.g. replacing carpet); asthma and allergies are affected by being in rooms that are damp, mouldy and/or dusty; proximity to open windows by heavy traffic could also be detrimental.
- When students are looking to rent privately, they need to avoid rooms with signs of mould or where washing can only be dried by hanging it in the room.
- Consider whether alternative study locations would be less problematic for the student.
- Asthma can affect a student's mobility or ability to walk for distances at a fast pace.

Study

- Consider offering additional individual support and assistance with establishing priorities for workload at short notice, for a short/defined period of time, if the student is experiencing a 'flare up' in their symptoms.
- Recognise the impact of variable fatigue and concentration levels on attendance and provide, for example, opportunities to revisit topics, use of assistive technology (such as lecture recording facilities).
- Occasional flexibility with deadlines might be required to allow the student to manage their workload; rest breaks or extra time might be needed for activities such as practicals or field work.
- On occasion the student might feel too unwell to attend and might need someone else to record a lecture for them.

Planning / Organisation

- Be aware of increased potential for absence for medical appointments.
- Additional consideration when planning field work and years abroad to anticipate potential triggers and develop risk assessments and health emergency plans in a timely way; contact with medical staff in advance would be prudent.
- Student may need self-catering accommodation when away from University of Oxford on study related visits, rather than catered facilities.

Examples of reasonable adjustments

The Student Support Plan (SSP) sets out the formal reasonable adjustments recommended by the Disability Advisory Service, and will provide additional specific individual information where needed. However, the following list gives some examples of possible reasonable adjustments.

Please note these adjustments will not be applicable to every student nor is this list exhaustive.

- Examination adjustments such as extra time, a separate room or venue, rest breaks. They may also be affected by open windows onto quads with freshly cut grass, or proximity to traffic.
- Privileged reader status at college / University libraries including extended and/or proxy loans.
- Evaluate need for a risk assessment and formulate a plan for what to do in the event of a health emergency.
- Provision of onsite accommodation with ensuite bathroom facilities (if necessary) and the option to be able to keep the same room throughout the course (and vacations); students with asthma are likely to need accommodation away from the road and possibly without carpets.

Additional resources

- For further advice and information staff may contact the Disability Advisory Service by email on disability@admin.ox.ac.uk or telephone **01865 (2)80459**, or see our [student](#) and [staff](#) web pages.

- How to recognise & manage allergic reactions:
[https://www.rcem.ac.uk/docs/Local%20Guidelines_DischargeAdvice/12aiii.%20Allergic%20reactions%20\(Oxford%20University%20Hospitals,%202011\).pdf](https://www.rcem.ac.uk/docs/Local%20Guidelines_DischargeAdvice/12aiii.%20Allergic%20reactions%20(Oxford%20University%20Hospitals,%202011).pdf)
- Oxford University Hospitals allergy services
<http://www.ouh.nhs.uk/services/departments/allergy/default.aspx>
- What is anaphylaxis:
<https://www.anaphylaxis.org.uk/corporate/corporate-what-is-anaphylaxis/corporate-signs-and-symptoms/>
<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Anaphylaxis/Pages/Introduction.aspx>
- Managing asthma at university: <https://www.asthma.org.uk/advice/living-with-asthma/leaving-home/>
- Understanding asthma: <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/asthma>
<https://www.asthma.org.uk/advice/understanding-asthma/what-is-asthma/>
<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/asthma/Pages/treatment.aspx>