

## Supporting young people after an acute episode of asthma:

### Information for Parents and Carers

#### What happens during an asthma attack?

The muscles that are wrapped around the airways contract and tighten. This makes them narrow and it's harder to breathe through them. Typical symptoms include wheezing, breathlessness, and a tight-feeling chest.

Although asthma responds very well to treatment, the experience can be stressful for everyone. When young people try to make sense of what they have been through, their thoughts and feelings can come out in lots of different ways. These include:

- Memories or pictures of the event popping back into their mind
- Wanting to avoid places or situations that trigger thoughts about the event
- Feeling like the event is happening again
- Becoming pre-occupied with playing out or drawing the event
- Going into denial and not wanting to talk
- Getting angry or easily upset
- Struggling to concentrate
- Struggling to get to sleep or stay asleep
- Nightmares
- Feeling insecure, being more jumpy and on the lookout for danger
- Increased fear and anxiety - not just about asthma
- Going backwards in areas such as toileting and eating
- Having difficulties at school
- Feeling sad and dejected
- Having other symptoms such as tummy aches, headaches and tiredness

These kinds of thoughts and feelings are not unusual, but with the right kind of support young people can put them behind them and move forward positively.

#### Things that can help:

- **Let them talk about it:** If you think they want to, encourage them to talk about their feelings. Listen without judgment. Not all young people will want to talk, and this is also OK.
- **Help them understand:** Memories can become jumbled, so if they ask about their asthma attack, provide the facts to help them make sense of what happened. Emphasize that their treatment worked and will do again.
- **Talk about their treatment:** Remind them that they have a highly effective action plan so that they can be in control of their asthma, and this will keep them safe. Make sure that their school are up to date with this.
- **Celebrate success:** Be positive and take pride in achievements. Show confidence in using treatments to keep asthma under control.
- **Check in with yourself as well:** Having a child with asthma can be stressful. If this is how you are feeling, try to take action to tackle this. Talk things through with a friend or health professional.
- **'Keep Calm and Carry On':** It's not easy, but should a young person have another asthma attack, appearing calm and reassuring will help reduce their anxiety and will make their treatment more effective.

#### Other things to consider:

- **Relax and breathe:** Simple breathing exercises can reduce anxiety and reduce asthma symptoms.
- **Look after yourself:** Exercise regularly, eat healthily, get enough sleep, and try to do more of what helps you feel good, like seeing friends.
- **Try not to be overprotective:** Understandably, you may feel you want to wrap your child in cotton wool after an asthma attack, but overprotecting young people can make them more fearful than they need to be.
- **If things don't improve:** If you or your child are still struggling with memories and feelings around the episode of asthma, speak to your GP or the health professional who supports your child with their asthma.