What is Asthma?

Asthma is a common and sometimes debilitating respiratory disorder which can affect people of all ages. Asthma is one of the most common chronic diseases in New Zealand. Sufferers can experience difficulty breathing, with an associated wheeze and tightness of the chest. Other symptoms may include coughing, vomiting and shaking.

What happens to the body during an asthma attack?

Asthma is basically a breathing problem resulting from increased sensitivity of the airways, which can be provoked by a range of stimuli, resulting in narrowing of the airways.

When an asthma attack starts, the muscle layer within the airway wall contracts and the lining of the airway swells, causing the airways to narrow and mucous to be secreted into the airway. As a result, it is more difficult for air to flow in and out of the lungs and breathing becomes difficult. The 'wheezing' sound of asthma is caused by the noise of air passing through the narrow, swollen airways. In very severe cases, so little air is being moved in and out that almost no sound is audible.

In addition, an irritating cough is often present. Sometimes a small amount of thick mucous is produced. If the attack is severe, the airways become very narrow and the diaphragm, which is the main breathing muscle, has to call on the secondary breathing muscles in the rib, neck and abdominal regions to help. This results in more energy being used to breathe, which can result in severe breathlessness and exhaustion.

As with many conditions, asthmatics react differently to attacks. Some may become very quiet or subdued as they concentrate on their breathing, while others may be obviously distressed and breathless, with a pronounced wheeze.

What is the difference between allergic and non-allergic asthma?

There are two different types of asthma: allergic and non-allergic.

Allergic asthma - symptoms are usually the result of inhaling or consuming some kind of external substance such as pollen, dust mites, mould, wheat or dairy produce.

Non-allergic asthma - can be triggered by a range of different factors, including physical exertion, some medications, fatigue, stress or exposure to environments which are cold and damp.

How can an osteopath help with asthma?

An osteopath can assist asthma sufferers by gently working with the body's structure to improve and enhance the breathing mechanism by;

- Relaxing the respiratory muscles
- Freeing restrictions of the chest, ribs and spine
- Improving lymphatic drainage from the lungs and airways
- Enhancing the blood supply to the chest region

The osteopath will use a variety of manual techniques to achieve the above, including soft tissue stretching and massage, along with articulation and mobilisation of the joints. Other areas of management include the formulation of an individual exercise program, with emphasis on breathing exercises and the avoidance of aggravating factors. The Osteopath may also provide advice on diet, posture, lifestyle and first aid measures during an attack.

Osteopathy does not replace conventional medicine for asthma. Osteopathy works well in conjunction with other health care professionals, with the long-term aim of improving the person's quality of life and helping to reduce the negative effects of Asthma.