

Supply of Salbutamol Inhalers to Schools – Pharmacy Guide



Introduction

Asthma is the most common long-term medical condition, affecting one in eleven children. On average, there are three children with asthma in every classroom in the UK. There are over 25,000 emergency hospital admissions for asthma amongst children each year in the UK.

Children should have their own reliever inhaler at school to treat symptoms and for use in the event of an asthma attack. For primary school children, the inhaler and spacer should be kept in the classroom whilst secondary school students should carry their inhaler (and associated spacer, if one is required) themselves. National guidance recommends that schools have a protocol on how and when the inhaler should be used. This will ensure staff know what to do in the event of a child having an asthma attack.

From 1st October 2014, the [Human Medicines \(Amendment\) \(No. 2\) Regulations 2014](#)ⁱ allowed schools to buy salbutamol inhalers, without a prescription, for use in [emergencies](#)ⁱⁱ (see <https://www.rpharms.com/resources/quick-reference-guides/supply-of-salbutamol-inhalers-to-schools> for more information).

Schools are not required to hold an inhaler – this legislation provides a discretionary power enabling schools to do so if they wish. However, keeping an inhaler for emergency use could prevent an unnecessary and traumatic trip to hospital for a child, and potentially save their life. Parents may have greater peace of mind about sending their child to school.

Pharmacies are not required to supply an inhaler to schools, however changes in the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's [Medicines, Ethics and Practice](#)ⁱⁱⁱ (MEP) do allow a pharmacy to do so.

Feedback from schools and pharmacies in London indicates a lower than expected use of the legislation and significant variation in understanding. For example, there is confusion around cost, legal requirements and quantities of inhalers which can be supplied.

This document aims to provide an easy-to-use reference guide for pharmacies in London on how the legislation should work in practice, thus:

- **Making it easy for pharmacies and schools to apply the legislation by addressing some of the misunderstandings and misinterpretations reported**
- **Complementing the guidance issued to schools in London by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC)**
- **Providing a consistent approach across London**
- **Providing pharmacists with the information they need to supply schools with inhalers with confidence.**

Summary of the national guidance

Which schools are included?

This legislation applies to all primary and secondary schools in London, both state and private. It does not apply to nurseries or children's clubs e.g. scouts.

Is this an NHS Service?

No, this is a private transaction between the school and the pharmacy.

Is this a free service?

No, this service is not funded by the NHS, Integrated Care Boards, local authorities or the Department for Education. Pharmacies are not required to provide inhalers or spacers free of charge to schools: **the school must pay for them as a retail item.**

Is there any guidance on cost?

No, this is a private transaction and it is down to the pharmacy and school to negotiate a price.

In what circumstance can a child or young person receive an emergency inhaler?

The emergency salbutamol inhaler should only be used by children:

- With written parental consent for use of the emergency inhaler
- Who have either been diagnosed with asthma and prescribed an inhaler as written in their asthma plan or
- Who have been prescribed an inhaler as reliever medication

Does the pharmacist have to see the written parental consent?

No, it is the school's responsibility.

Is a prescription required?

No, schools can buy inhalers and spacers from a pharmaceutical supplier, such as a local pharmacy or internet pharmacy without a prescription, using a signed order.

Who can provide the signed order?

The principal or head teacher at the school must sign the order to enable a supply to be made.

What information should be on the signed order?

In line with legislation requirements, the order must be signed by the principal or head teacher at the school concerned and state:

- The name of the school for which the medicinal product is required
- The purpose for which that product is required
- The total quantity required
- The product required, including spacer if relevant
- The strength (if relevant)

Ideally, appropriately headed paper should be used; however, this is not a legislative requirement.

What type of inhalers can be purchased?

The legislation only supports the purchase of a salbutamol metered dose inhaler (MDI). Other inhaler types cannot be supplied – autohaler, novoliser, accuhaler, easyhaler, easi-breathe, clickhaler are excluded. Pharmacists can provide advice to schools on the correct type of inhaler. There are a number of different types of salbutamol MDIs: both branded and generics are available, as well as inhalers that support the green agenda. It is important to ensure that schools do not become confused.

Inhalers containing other drugs e.g. inhaled corticosteroids (ICS), or other short-acting beta-agonist (SABA) e.g. terbutaline cannot be purchased. Combination inhalers where one of the drugs is salbutamol are also excluded.

Which type of spacers can be purchased?

Pharmacists have an important role in advising schools on the correct selection of the most appropriate spacer device for the MDI. It is important that spacers purchased are compatible with salbutamol MDIs and are also suitable for use in the age group of intended use:

- There are several small volume spacers available, for example, the [Aerochamber^{iv}](#), [Able Spacer^v](#), [Space Chamber Plus^{vi}](#), [A2A Spacer^{vii}](#) and [Pocket Chamber^{viii}](#). All these spacers have a multi-fit flange which means any MDI will fit into the spacer
- The Volumatic is a large volume spacer which is fitted with a one-way valve at the mouthpiece. It is made specifically for the manufacturers' own products (for example Ventolin MDI), although other makes of MDIs do fit the Volumatic.

If the school's emergency inhaler and spacer are used, the plastic spacer should be sent home with the child, with a request that it be replaced as soon as possible. It should not be washed and reused. Further information on spacer use and inhaler compatibility in children and young people can be accessed through [NHS England London's asthma toolkit^x](#), Asthma + Lung UK's videos on [inhalers^x](#) and [spacers^{xi}](#) and from [RightBreathe^{xii}](#). A pharmacist will also be able to advise on compatibility of devices.

How many inhalers or spacers can a school purchase?

There is no restriction on the number of inhalers or spacers a school can purchase, however schools have been issued with guidance on retaining emergency asthma kits. One kit should contain at least one salbutamol metered dose inhaler and at least two plastic spacers or two disposable spacers compatible with the inhaler. A full list of contents of an emergency kit is listed in Appendix 1 along with an example. When considering the number of inhalers, consideration should be given to:

- The number of pupils in the school who have asthma
- The size of the school (minimum of two inhalers per school with at least one inhaler per site)
- The number of sites over which the school is located
- The number of emergency kits required

What records need to be kept in the pharmacy?

The signed order needs to be retained for 2 years from the date of supply or an entry made into the Prescription-Only-Medicine (POM) register. Even where the signed order is retained it is good practice to make a record in the POM register for audit purposes. In line with normal record keeping requirements an entry in the POM register must include:

- Date the POM was supplied
- Name, quantity and (where it is not apparent) formulation and strength of POM supplied
- Name and address, trade, business or profession of the person to whom the medicine was supplied
- The purpose for which it was sold or supplied

Where can information on a school and head teachers or principals be sourced?

There is no centralised database containing details of schools and head teachers across Great Britain. Possible sources of information would include:

- Department for Education's register of educational establishments in England and Wales (<https://www.get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/>)

- Local authorities' directory of schools (<http://schoolswebdirectory.co.uk/localauthorities.php>)
- Ofsted reports (<https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk>)
- Information on the individual school's website

What advice or information are pharmacies expected to provide?

As with the supply of medicines in other scenarios to patients and the public, it is expected that pharmacists will provide advice on the use of inhalers and spacers. Supporting information can be accessed through [NHS England London's asthma toolkit](#)^{xiii}, [Asthma + Lung UK's videos on inhalers](#)^{xiv} and [spacers](#)^{xv} and from [RightBreathe](#)^{xvi}.

Pharmacists can also offer [practical advice](#)^{xvii} on how schools can adhere to the DHSC guidance.

Pharmacists are recommended to familiarise themselves with this guidance, which is a short 22-page document, and the subsequent [guidance in MEP](#)^{xviii}.

Adherence to Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) guidance

[DHSC guidance for schools](#)^{xix} and [London's Asthma Friendly School guide](#)^{xx} includes advice in relation to emergency asthma kits:

- Check on a half-termly basis that the inhaler and spacers are present and in working order
- Obtain replacement inhalers when expiry dates approach
- Replace plastic spacers with new ones following use. Disposable spacers should be thrown away after use, as should the inhalers that they are used with
- Expired inhalers should be returned to the pharmacy for safe disposal and not put into household bins

Batch number and expiry dates

Pharmacists can advise schools on how to recognise batch numbers and how to interpret expiry dates.

Number of doses

Some MDIs may contain a dosage counter, whilst others do not. Depending upon the type of MDI purchased, schools can be advised when it may be time to replace the inhaler.

Cleaning

Using plastic spacers

DHSC guidance for schools and London's Asthma Friendly School guide states:

- The inhaler itself can usually be reused, provided it is cleaned after use (as long as it is used with a hard plastic spacer). The inhaler canister should be removed, and the plastic inhaler housing and cap should be washed in warm running water, and left to dry in air in a clean, safe place. The canister should be returned to the housing when it is dry, and the cap replaced, and the inhaler returned to the designated storage place.
- Pharmacists can advise on the practical aspects of cleaning an inhaler and any additional advice given by the manufacturer. However, if there is any risk of contamination (for example if the inhaler has been used without a spacer), it should also not be re-used but disposed of.

- Once used, the plastic spacer should be sent home with the child with a request that the family replace it. It should not be used by another child. In the meantime, the school should replace the spacer.

Using disposable spacers

As disposable spacers are not valved and tidal breathing would mean breath goes back into the aerosol inhaler (thereby contaminating it) neither the salbutamol inhaler nor spacer should be used again.

In this scenario, salbutamol inhalers should be single patient use only. The used salbutamol inhaler must be disposed of after that individual's treatment is complete. The disposable spacer must be thrown away.

It is suggested that schools have at least two inhalers and two spacers in stock so that there is always a new one ready for any emergency situation. If there is only one in stock, the used one should not be disposed of until a replacement is available. In the unusual situation of a queue of people needing emergency bronchodilation (for example in thunderstorm asthma) it is safer to use the same used inhaler than to withhold treatment.

Disposal

DHSC guidance to schools states:

Manufacturers' guidelines usually recommend that spent inhalers are returned to the pharmacy to be recycled, rather than being thrown away.

For more information see [Recycle Now](#)^{xxi}

Inhaler technique

Correct inhaler technique should be reinforced at every opportunity. Pharmacists can be a useful resource in supporting schools and their staff who may not be familiar with good inhaler technique. Detailed information on good inhaler technique in children and young people is available through [NHS England London's asthma toolkit](#), Asthma + Lung UK's videos on [inhalers](#) and [spacers](#) and from [RightBreathe](#). Asthma + Lung UK has more information on [tidal breathing](#).

Appendix 1

An emergency asthma inhaler kit should include:

- At least one salbutamol metered dose inhaler (MDI)
- At least two plastic spacers or two disposable spacers compatible with the inhaler
- Instructions on using the inhaler and plastic or disposable spacer
- Instructions on cleaning and storing the inhaler;
- Instructions on storing and disposing of the inhaler / spacer
- Manufacturers' information
- A checklist of inhalers, identified by their batch number and expiry date, with half-termly checks recorded
- A note of the arrangements for replacing the inhaler and spacers
- A list of children permitted to use the emergency inhaler as detailed in their individual healthcare plans
- A record of administration (i.e. when the inhaler has been used)^{xxii}

Below is an example of an emergency asthma kit recommended by NHS England London

An emergency asthma inhaler kit should include:	Yes	No
At least one salbutamol metered dose inhaler (MDI)		
<p>At least two plastic spacers or two disposable spacers compatible with the inhaler (see https://bit.ly/3nATvmj for disposable spacers); Salamol is compatible with this spacer. For others please check.</p> <p>Once used, the plastic spacer should be sent home with the child with a request that the family replace it. It should not be used by another child. In the meantime, the school should replace the spacer.</p> <p>As disposable spacers are not valved and tidal breathing would mean breath goes back into the aerosol inhaler (thereby contaminating it) both the salbutamol inhaler and disposable spacers should not be reused. In this scenario, salbutamol inhalers should be single patient use only. The used salbutamol inhaler must be disposed of after that individual's treatment is complete. The disposable spacer must be thrown away.</p> <p>It is suggested that schools have at least two inhalers and two spacers in stock so that there is always a new one ready for any emergency situation. If there is only one in stock, the used one should not be disposed of until a replacement is available. In the unusual situation of a queue of people needing emergency bronchodilation (for example in thunderstorm asthma) it is safer to use the same used inhaler than to withhold treatment.</p>		
Instructions on using the inhaler and spacer/plastic chamber		
Manufacturer's information		

Instructions on cleaning, storing and disposing of the inhaler and spacer		
A checklist of inhalers, identified by their batch number and expiry date, with half termly checks recorded		
A note of the arrangements for replacing the inhaler and spacers		
Pharmacy contact details		
A record of administration template (i.e. when the inhaler has been used)		
Pen		
Asthma Champion's Details 1. 2.		

Acknowledgements (2021 and 2025 revised guide)

The 2015 guide was developed by Donal Markey (Assistant Director of Programmes medicines and pharmacy, NCL ICB) and Sara Nelson (Previously Head of CYP Transformation, Babies, Children and Young People's Team, NHS England – London)

Darush Attar-Zadeh, Clinical Fellow Respiratory Pharmacist – NWL Integrated Care Board

Richard Chavasse, Consultant Paediatrician, St George's Hospital

Emily Guilmant-Farry, Community Children's Matron Newham

Georgie Herskovits, Programme Manager, Babies, Children and Young People's Team, NHS England – London

Christine Kirkpatrick, Programme Manager, Babies, Children and Young People's Team, NHS England – London

Monique Rodesano, Lead for Islington Asthma and Allergy Friendly Schools

Sukeshi Makhecha, Consultant Pharmacist in Paediatric Asthma & Respiratory medicine, Royal Brompton & Evelina Hospitals

Reena Rabheru-Dodhy, Senior Primary Care Pharmacist, NHS South West London ICB

Alison Summerfield Paediatric Nurse Consultant – Respiratory & Allergy, The Hillingdon Hospital NHS Trust

ⁱ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2014/1878/contents/made>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/emergency-asthma-inhalers-for-use-in-schools>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.rpharms.com/publications/the-mep>

^{iv} <https://www.asthma.org.uk/advice/inhaler-videos/facemask-child/>

^v https://www.rightbreathe.com/spacers/able-2-spacer-clement-clarke-international-ltd-1-device/?s=&device_type=spacer

^{vi} https://www.rightbreathe.com/spacers/2292/?s=&device_type=spacer

^{vii} <https://www.rightbreathe.com/spacers/a2a-spacer-clement-clarke-international-ltd-1-device/>

^{viii} <https://www.rightbreathe.com/spacers/pocket-chamber-nspire-health-ltd-1-device/>

^{ix} [Inhaler Technique - Transformation Partners in Health and Care](#)

^x <https://www.asthmaandlung.org.uk/conditions/asthma/child/medicines/help>

^{xi} [Spacers | Asthma + Lung UK](#)

^{xii} <https://www.rightbreathe.com/>

^{xiii} [Inhaler Technique - Transformation Partners in Health and Care](#)

^{xiv} [Help your child use their inhaler | Asthma + Lung UK](#)

^{xv} [Spacers | Asthma + Lung UK](#)

^{xvi} <https://www.rightbreathe.com/>

^{xvii}

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/416468/emergency_inhalers_in_schools.pdf

^{xviii} <https://www.rpharms.com/publications/the-mep>

^{xix} <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/emergency-asthma-inhalers-for-use-in-schools>

^{xx} [London schools' guide for the care of children and young people with asthma: Pre-school, primary and secondary school years - Transformation Partners in Health and Care](#)

^{xxi} <http://bit.ly/2NGMBQ9>

^{xxii} Guidance on the use of emergency salbutamol inhalers in schools March 2015, DH