Background and Aims: Data on adult asthma is scarce in Sri Lanka. The objective of this study was to estimate the prevalence of asthma and related symptoms amongst adults in the general population.

Methods: A multi-centered, cross-sectional study was conducted using an interviewer-administered translated version of the screening questionnaire of the European Community Respiratory Health Survey from June to December 2013 in 7 provinces of Sri Lanka. Subjects were selected randomly from different regions by stratified sampling. The prevalence of asthma was defined as “wheezing in the past 12 months (current wheeze)”, “self-reported attack of asthma in the past 12 months’ or ‘current asthma medication use’.

Results: The study comprised 1872 subjects (45.1% males, 48.8% aged 18-45 years) of which 12.2% were current smokers. In the total population, the prevalence of current wheeze was 23.9% (95% CI: 22.0%-25.9%), of self-reported asthma was 11.8% (95% CI: 10.3%-13.2%) and of current asthma medication use was 11.1% (95% CI: 9.6%-12.5%). The prevalence of asthma according to a positive response to either of the above questions was 31.4% (95% CI: 29.3%-33.4%)

The prevalence of symptom was higher in adults aged >45 years. Of those with current wheeze, 60.9% denied a diagnosis of asthma and only 38.2% admitted to use of asthma medication.

In those with current wheeze, wheezing was the only symptom in 19.9% whereas 80.1% had at least one other respiratory symptom (tightness of chest, cough or shortness of breath) of which cough was the most common symptom.

In those without current wheeze, self-reported asthma and current asthma medication use, 30%, 35.9% and 36.6% respectively had at least one other respiratory symptom.

Conclusions: The prevalence of asthma in Sri Lankan adults is high in comparison with global data. A significant percentage of symptomatic individuals deny having asthma and are not on medication.