

Asthma

What is asthma?

Asthma causes wheezing, coughing, and shortness of breath. Asthma is more common in children than adults. People who had asthma in childhood may not have it when they are adults. Or it may come back later in life. Others may have asthma for the first time in mid- or late life. You may start coughing or wheezing:

- When you exercise.
- When you breathe in something you are allergic to, such as dust, pollen, mold, or animal dander.
- When you breathe in something that irritates your lungs, like cold air, viruses, and tobacco smoke.

When this coughing and wheezing happens, it is called an asthma attack. An asthma attack may:

- Last a few minutes or for days.
- Be mild, moderate, or severe.
- Happen anywhere, at any time.
- Be fatal.

It is very important to get treatment for asthma so you can live a healthy, active life.

How does asthma happen?

If you have asthma, the airways in your lungs are always a little swollen. When you exercise or breathe in something you are allergic to or that irritates your lungs:

- The insides of your airways get more swollen.
- They start to make more mucus than you need.
- The muscles in the airways start to tighten.

When this happens, your airways get smaller. It's harder for air to move in and out. You may:

- Wheeze.
- Cough.
- Feel short of breath.
- Feel tight in the chest.

How do I know if I have asthma?

Your health care provider will:

- Ask about your breathing problems.
- Give you a checkup.
- Give you one or more breathing tests. You may be tested before and after taking medicine to find out if the medicine helps.

How is asthma treated?

With asthma treatment, you should be able to live a normal, active life. You will probably need to:

- Take medicine.
- Stay away from things that make it hard for you to breathe.

There are two main kinds of medicines for asthma:

- **Quick-acting medicines called bronchodilators** relax the muscles in the airways and let more air move in and out. This medicine can be used to treat asthma attacks.
- **Preventive medicines** help make the airways swell less. These preventive drugs **cannot** be used to stop attacks once they start.

Your health care provider will tell you what will work best for you.

- You will probably need a quick-acting inhaler for asthma attacks.
- You may need to take preventive medicine every day as well.

Be sure you know how to use your inhaler the right way.

- Read the directions that come with your inhaler.
- Most inhalers work best if you hold them 1 to 2 inches in front of your mouth when you spray.
- Do not close your mouth around the inhaler. Less medicine will get to your lungs.

It may help to use a spacer tube. You will breathe in more asthma medicine this way. Ask your pharmacist how you can tell when your inhaler canister is empty.

- Put one end of the spacer in your mouth.
- Attach the inhaler to the other end.
- Spray and then breathe in slowly and fully.

You may need to check how well you are breathing.

- Your health care provider may prescribe a peak flow meter.
- The peak flow meter will help you know when you should take more medicine to keep from having severe asthma attacks.

How can I take care of myself?

Here are some ways you can keep your home free of things that could make it hard to breathe and stay healthy:

Take care of your bedding:

- Cover your mattress, box springs, and pillows with zippered plastic covers.
- Wash bedding in hot water once a week.
- Wash and thoroughly dry pillows once a month.

Having a pet is not a good idea. But if you do have a pet:

- Have your pet bathed every week.
- Vacuum every day.
- Use a HEPA air filter.

Stay away from mold and other things that make it hard for you to breathe.

- If you use a vaporizer, clean it often.
- Stay indoors when the humidity or pollen count is high.
- Use air conditioning to cool your home instead of open windows.
- Do not use attic fans.
- Stay away from cigarette smoke.
- Stay away from the fumes or vapors of harsh chemicals, such as bleach.

It's also important to:

- Take your medicines exactly as your health care provider tells you.
- Keep your checkup appointments as often as your provider recommends.
- Get a flu shot every October.

Tell your health care provider right away:

- If you can't breathe comfortably even though you are taking your medicines.
- If you are having an asthma attack that is not getting better even though you have used your quick-acting inhaler. If this is happening, you must get medical care right away, which may mean going to the emergency room or calling 911.

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