

ASTHMA, ADULT



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HEALTH

Asthma is a condition that causes swelling and narrowing of the airways. These are the passages that lead from the nose and mouth down into the lungs. When asthma symptoms get worse it is called an asthma attack or flare. This can make it hard to breathe. Asthma flares can range from minor to life-threatening. There is no cure for asthma, but medicines and lifestyle changes can help to control it.

What are the causes?

It is not known exactly what causes asthma, but certain things can cause asthma symptoms to get worse (triggers).

What can trigger an asthma attack?

- Cigarette smoke.
- Mold.
- Dust.
- Your pet's skin flakes (dander).
- Cockroaches.
- Pollen.
- Air pollution (like household cleaners, wood smoke, smog, or chemical odors).

What are the signs or symptoms?

- Trouble breathing (shortness of breath).
- Coughing.
- Making high-pitched whistling sounds when you breathe, most often when you breathe out (wheezing).
- Chest tightness.
- Tiredness with little activity.
- Poor exercise tolerance.

How is this treated?

- Controller medicines that help prevent asthma symptoms.
- Fast-acting reliever or rescue medicines. These give short-term relief of asthma symptoms.
- Allergy medicines if your attacks are brought on by allergens.
- Medicines to help control the body's defense (immune) system.
- Staying away from the things that cause asthma attacks.

Follow these instructions at home:

Avoiding triggers in your home

- **Do not** allow anyone to smoke in your home.
- Limit use of fireplaces and wood stoves.
- Get rid of pests (such as roaches and mice) and their droppings.
- Keep your home clean.
 - Clean your floors. Dust regularly. Use cleaning products that do not smell.
 - Wash bed sheets and blankets every week in hot water. Dry them in a dryer.
 - Have someone vacuum when you are not home.
 - Change your heating and air conditioning filters often.
- Use blankets that are made of polyester or cotton.

General instructions

- Take over-the-counter and prescription medicines only as told by your doctor.
- **Do not** smoke or use any products that contain nicotine or tobacco. If you need help quitting, ask your doctor.
 - Stay away from secondhand smoke.
- Avoid doing things outdoors when allergen counts are high and when air quality is low.
- Warm up before you exercise. Take time to cool down after exercise.
- Use a peak flow meter as told by your doctor. A peak flow meter is a tool that measures how well your lungs are working.
 - Keep track of the peak flow meter's readings. Write them down.
- Follow your asthma action plan. This is a written plan for taking care of your asthma and treating your attacks.
- Make sure you get all the shots (vaccines) that your doctor recommends. Ask your doctor about a flu shot and a pneumonia shot.
- Keep all follow-up visits.

Contact a doctor if:

- You have wheezing, shortness of breath, or a cough even while taking medicine to prevent attacks.

- The mucus you cough up (sputum) is thicker than usual.
- The mucus you cough up changes from clear or white to yellow, green, gray, or is bloody.
- You have problems from the medicine you are taking, such as:
 - A rash.
 - Itching.
 - Swelling.
 - Trouble breathing.
- You need reliever medicines more than 2–3 times a week.
- Your peak flow reading is still at 50–79% of your personal best after following the action plan for 1 hour.
- You have a fever.

Get help right away if:

- You seem to be worse and are not responding to medicine during an asthma attack.
- You are short of breath even at rest.
- You get short of breath when doing very little activity.
- You have trouble eating, drinking, or talking.
- You have chest pain or tightness.
- You have a fast heartbeat.
- Your lips or fingernails start to turn blue.
- You are light-headed or dizzy, or you faint.

- Your peak flow is less than 50% of your personal best.
- You feel too tired to breathe normally.

These symptoms may be an emergency. Get help right away. Call 911.

- **Do not wait to see if the symptoms will go away.**
- **Do not drive yourself to the hospital.**

Summary

- Asthma is a long-term (chronic) condition in which the airways get tight and narrow. An asthma attack can make it hard to breathe.
- Asthma cannot be cured, but medicines and lifestyle changes can help control it.
- Make sure you understand how to avoid triggers and how and when to use your medicines.
- Avoid things that can cause allergy symptoms (allergens). These include animal skin flakes (dander) and pollen from trees or grass.
- Avoid things that pollute the air. These may include household cleaners, wood smoke, smog, or chemical odors.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.