Understanding asthma

Asthma is a long-term disease that affects your lungs. It can cause your chest to feel tight; it can make you wheeze and cough or feel short of breath. Sometimes you can have a nighttime or early morning cough.

You can control your asthma by taking medicine and avoiding causes (or triggers) of an asthma attack. There is no cure for asthma yet, but you can control it if you take medicine and get rid of things around you that make your asthma worse.

What happens during an asthma attack?

When you breathe, your lungs bring in fresh air and push out used air, but with asthma it can be harder to push out the used air and bring in the fresh air because:

- The lining of the airway swells
- Your body makes too much mucus and it clogs the airway
- The muscles around the airway get tight, which makes the airway more narrow

Who gets asthma?

- If a family member has asthma, you are more likely to have asthma
- People who smoke or are around someone who does are more likely to have asthma
- People with allergies are more likely to have asthma

What are the signs and symptoms?

- Your chest may feel tight
- Coughing
- Wheezing (whistling or squeaking sound when you breathe out)
- Being short of breath
- Waking up during the night coughing
- Shallow breathing (or panting)
- Fast breathing (more than 30 breaths per minute for adults and more than 50 breaths per minute for children)
- Retractions when breathing (skin pulling in around the collar bone, base of the throat, or ribs)
- Emergency symptoms: your lips may turn dark red and your skin may look very pale and gray. This requires immediate medical care, so call 911 right away.

How is asthma diagnosed?

- Medical history: The doctor will ask if it runs in the family or if other family members have had similar problems breathing.
- Physical exam to listen to your breathing sounds and heart rate.
- Pulmonary function test (lung function test): You will breathe into a spirometer which measures how much air you can breathe out in one second (this generally isn’t used for children under age 5).
- Chest x-rays to make sure there isn’t something else causing breathing problems.
- Blood test or skin prick (allergy) test.
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**What your doctor may do for you**
- Prescribe medications
- Identify and help you eliminate triggers
- Assist you in controlling your asthma
- Follow-up with you in six months

**To-do list for asthma patients**
- Recognize and report symptoms to your doctor
- Discuss treatment plan (medications to take, triggers to avoid, how to follow your asthma action plan)
- Follow treatment plan faithfully (follow all doctor directions and make any needed allergy modifications to your home)
- Be vigilant about any changes (report medications not working, any new triggers, etc.)
- Follow up with doctor regarding changes

**Controlling Asthma**

**What causes your problems?**
Keep track of what seems to bother you. You will start to see a pattern; it is different for every person who has asthma.

You can keep a small notebook and write down where you were when you had an asthma attack.

**Triggers (anything that makes your asthma worse)**
- **Common colds** are the most common trigger and usually last longer in people who have asthma.

**Allergens**
- **Animals**: If it’s not possible to remove animals from the home, keep them out of your bedroom and off your bed (some people find it also helps to keep the door to their bedroom closed).
- **Dust**: Clean using a damp cloth. Wash bedding and stuffed animals in hot water once a week. Use dust mite-proof mattress covers, pillows, and pillow covers.
- **Pollen**: Hay fever or seasonal allergies may be worse at certain times of the year. Some things that help are:
  - Keeping the windows closed in your home and car.
  - Using central air instead of swamp coolers.
  - Showering before you go to bed at night to remove pollen from your hair and skin.
- **Insects and pests**: Keep food areas clean by wiping down countertops and stove tops. Keep food in covered containers and take out garbage daily.
- **Certain foods**: Peanuts, tree nuts, fish, corn, wheat, milk, eggs and sulfite food additives can cause allergic reactions. Avoid any of these if they trigger asthma symptoms. Read food labels carefully and ask questions if you are eating out.
- Your doctor may want you to carry an adrenalin or epinephrine injector pen to self-treat a sudden, life-threatening allergy or asthma emergency (which consists of difficulty breathing, swelling, and hives).
**New Asthma Diagnosis**

**Irritants**
- **Strong smells:** Cleaning sprays, smoke (cigarette smoke and fireplace smoke), air pollution, strong scented candles, and perfumes. Avoid these whenever possible.

- **Exercise:** Some people with asthma may cough, wheeze or feel short of breath when they exercise. It helps to take extra time to warm up and cool down when exercising. Exercise helps keep your lungs strong and healthy. Carry your rescue inhaler with you when you exercise.

- **Weather**
  - Breathing cold air can trigger asthma symptoms. It helps if you breathe through a scarf in the winter, or you can cup your hands over your nose to warm the air before you breathe in.
  - Some people are bothered by anything cold (ice cream, smoothies, and yogurt).
  - Sudden hot and humid days can trigger asthma. Use central air in your home and drink enough fluids to stay hydrated.

**Medications** (that may trigger asthma attacks):
- Aspirin and other NSAIDS (Motrin, Advil, Aleve, Naprosyn).
- Betablockers (Corgard, Inderal, Normodyne, Propranolol, Pindolol, and Trandate) are used to treat high blood pressure, heart conditions and migraines.
- ACE inhibitors (Lisinopril, Accupril, Aceon, Altace, Captopril, Lotensin, Mavik, Monopril, Prinivil, Tarka, Univasc, Vasotec, and Zestril) are used to treat high blood pressure and heart disease.

**Strong emotions:** Stress and asthma often go hand in hand. Crying, yelling, expressing anger, or laughing hard can cause an asthma attack.

**Mold:** For people sensitive to mold, inhaling mold spores can cause an asthma attack. To prevent mold from growing, fix any water leaks quickly. Open a window or use exhaust fans while showering or cooking to reduce moisture in the room. If you see mold, clean with soap and water and keep the area dry.

You should be able to do all the things you want to do if your asthma is in control.