

Understanding Asthma Symptoms and Treatments

What is asthma?

Asthma is a chronic inflammatory disease of the lungs and airways affecting more than 15 million Americans. While it can be treated successfully, it is considered a chronic disease for which there is no cure.

Asthma is characterized by inflammation that occurs when your bronchi come in contact with irritants or “triggers.” These triggers cause airways to swell, bronchial muscles to tighten, and excess mucus to build up; as a result, breathing becomes difficult.

Another component of asthma is bronchoconstriction. This occurs when bands of muscles surrounding your bronchial tubes contract, causing your airways to narrow. The result is chest tightness, wheezing, and shortness of breath.

What is an asthma episode like?

During an asthma episode, the lining of the bronchial tubes that make up the airways in your upper lungs becomes inflamed and swollen. The surrounding muscles become tight, narrowing the airways even more; and a thick mucus is produced, making breathing even more difficult. An acute episode is commonly known as an asthma “attack.”

Recognizing asthma symptoms

The most common symptoms of asthma are rapid and labored breathing, a whistling or wheezing sound with each breath, coughing, and a tight feeling in your chest. These symptoms may be started, or “triggered,” in many different ways.

Many causes and triggers

While the exact cause of asthma is not known, it does seem to run in families. People who suffer from asthma find that many different things may bring on an episode:

- Allergens: pollen, animal dander, cockroaches, dust, dust mites, and food additives
- Other environmental conditions such as strong odors, cigarette smoke or fumes, air pollution, and changes in air temperature
- Indoor pollutants such as unvented stoves or heaters, perfumes, cleaning agents, and other chemicals
- Stress or strong emotions

Diagnosing and treating asthma symptoms

The usual starting point is a visit to your doctor for a physical exam. This appointment will probably include:

- A review of your family’s health history
- A discussion of your own personal medical history
- A physical exam, during which your doctor will listen to your breathing
- Laboratory tests that measure lung function
- Tests for allergies

Once you and your doctor know what kind of asthma you have, and what your asthma triggers are, you can work together to develop a treatment plan that meets your needs. This plan may include medication, lifestyle changes, and avoidance of triggers.

There are two kinds of medicines that are prescribed to treat asthma:

- Maintenance medications such as *anti-inflammatory drugs* help to prevent and reduce inflammation and swelling of the airways. They are an important part of long-term management of asthma symptoms. *Long-acting bronchodilators* are also available for the long-term control of daytime symptoms, nocturnal asthma, and exercise-induced bronchospasm (EIB).
- Quick-relief, or “rescue,” medications such as *short-acting bronchodilators* help provide rapid relief to relax muscles around the airways.

Learn how to take control

You can take an active role in controlling your asthma symptoms by working with your doctor, taking your medication regularly, and making the lifestyle changes that can reduce your risks. Follow these guidelines for more successful asthma management:

- Eat right, exercise, and get enough rest.
- Know your personal asthma triggers and learn how to avoid them.
- Watch for warning signs of asthma episodes and take steps promptly.
- Stay calm when symptoms occur, and don’t hesitate to seek help.

Learn when to get help

If your medication does not seem to relieve your symptoms, seek medical care immediately. Make sure that your family, friends, and coworkers are aware that you have asthma, and show them how they can assist you if urgent help is needed. Be sure to keep emergency information and telephone numbers handy.

Make the decision to be in control. Remember that asthma is a controllable disease, and that it need not prevent you from enjoying a healthy, active life.

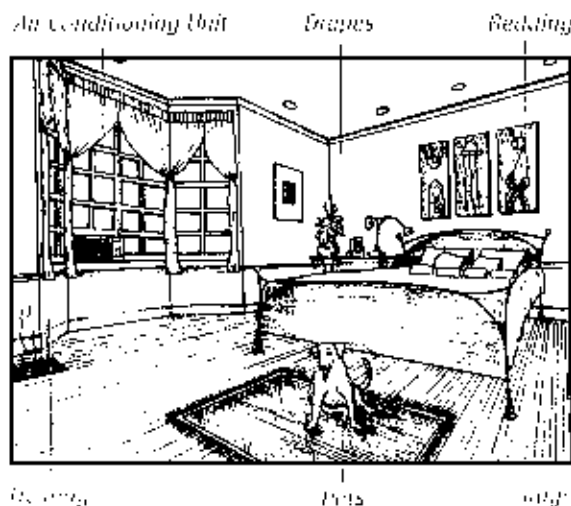
Avoiding Asthma Triggers

Although it's not reasonable to think you can completely eliminate asthma triggers, removing as many as possible from your home and work surroundings can help you enjoy a healthier life with fewer asthma episodes.

In your home

While it may be impossible to remove every trigger from your home, there are many things you can do to give yourself "breathing room":

- **Air conditioning.** Many airborne triggers can be captured in the filter of an air conditioning unit. If air conditioning every room is not an option for you, a single unit in your bedroom would probably be the best alternative. Be sure filters are changed regularly.
- **Heating.** If your home or apartment has forced-air heating, put a filter or a piece of cheesecloth over each vent to help trap airborne particles. Again, change these filters regularly.
- **Dust control.** Heavy drapes, upholstered furniture, thick rugs, and decorative items are major dust collectors. Try to choose furnishings that can be cleaned easily: vinyl or leather couches, washable lampshades, mini-blinds, and wood or vinyl flooring. Put your favorite decorations in glass-fronted cases or shadow boxes.
- **Bedding.** Choose pillows with Dacron, foam, or other synthetic fillings. Cover your mattress and box spring with allergen-proof covers, and use washable cotton or synthetic bedding. Wash bedding at least once a week in 130°F water, which is the "HOT" button on most washers. Avoid dust ruffles, which, as their name implies, tend to collect dust and dust mites.
- **Prevent mold.** Keep bathrooms clean and dry; use a fan or dehumidifier. Check foods regularly for spoilage. Dry freshly laundered clothes promptly. Remove houseplants, since moist potting soil is a haven for mold.
- **Pets.** Unfortunately, animal dander and saliva are potent allergens. Therefore, at least make your bedroom a "pet-free zone."
- **Pest control.** Pests, particularly dust mites and cockroaches, can represent significant asthma triggers.



- **Strong odors.** Cigarette smoke and strong odors from perfumes, air fresheners, household cleaners, and other sources can be severely irritating. Limit smoking to the outdoors or to specific rooms, and avoid use of strong-smelling cleaners or cosmetics.

In your workplace

Help your coworkers and supervisors understand your asthma; they will be more willing to help control the triggers in your workplace. It may be possible to relocate your work area, or make other changes in your work environment.

- Minimize your exposure to smoke, heavy scents, and fumes.

- Air conditioners or air filtration systems can be helpful, if they are maintained regularly.
- Avoid potted plants, which can harbor mold.
- Take steps to manage tension and stress that can contribute to asthma episodes.

Foods and medications

- Many processed foods and drinks contain chemicals (sulfites) that are added as preservatives, but can trigger an asthma episode. The most common are dried fruits, fruit juices, vegetables, and wines.
- Cheese and other dairy products, citrus fruits, tomatoes, seafood, and corn are also foods that may initiate an asthma episode.
- Some medications, even the ones you buy over the counter, may also be asthma triggers. Aspirin and aspirinlike products may cause symptoms in people who have chronic sinus problems or nasal polyps. Beta-adrenergic blocking agents (used to treat migraine, rapid heart rate, congestive heart failure, tremor, and glaucoma) are also known to cause asthma episodes.

Consult your doctor before you take any drug other than the ones already prescribed for your asthma. Ask about specific foods or drugs you should avoid. And be sure to notify your doctor if you experience any unusual reactions to foods or drugs.

The success of your asthma management program depends on your willingness to take control of your environment—at home, at work, at school, and anywhere else you spend time. Work with your doctor to learn more about your personal triggers and how to avoid them.

Your Asthma Action Plan

Some people with asthma can easily recognize the warning signs of asthma episodes. Other people, however, may experience a serious narrowing of their airways before they notice anything. Peak flow monitoring is one way to spot problems early—you'll learn more techniques as you become more experienced in managing your symptoms.

Why have an action plan?

When you know exactly what to do, you feel more in control—especially when sudden symptoms take you by surprise. Work with your doctor to complete this action plan, so you'll have a personalized strategy outlining the steps you need to take.

Mild episode

Symptoms: Mild wheezing, cough, tightness in your chest. Shortness of breath during activity, but not at rest.

Peak flow: 80% to 100% of your ideal number

ACTION: (complete this part with your doctor)

Moderate episode

Symptoms: Moderate wheezing, cough, tightness in your chest. Shortness of breath even at rest. Your symptoms may vary according to your daily activities and individual triggers.

Peak flow: 50% to 80% of your ideal number

ACTION: (complete this part with your doctor)

Severe episode

Symptoms: Severe shortness of breath, cough, and chest tightness. Wheeze may disappear. Difficulty walking or talking. Possible straining of neck or chest muscles when taking each breath.

Peak flow: Less than 50% of your ideal number

ACTION: (complete this part with your doctor)

Medical alert!

If you notice any of the following signs, go to the nearest emergency room immediately!

- Struggling to breathe
- Hunching over
- Chest and neck pulled or sucked in when taking each breath
- Unable to walk or talk
- Lips or fingernails turned blue or gray

Who to call in an emergency

Doctor _____

Hospital _____

Ambulance _____

Paramedics _____

Family member _____

