

Patient education: Asthma in adults (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What is asthma?

Asthma is a condition that can make it hard to breathe. Asthma symptoms can be mild or severe. And they can come and go. Sometimes asthma symptoms start all of a sudden. Asthma attacks happen when the airways in the lungs become narrow and inflamed. Asthma can run in families.

What are the symptoms of asthma?

Asthma symptoms can include:

- Wheezing or noisy breathing
- Coughing
- A tight feeling in the chest
- Shortness of breath

Symptoms can happen each day, each week, or less often. Symptoms can range from mild to severe. Although it is rare, an episode of asthma can sometimes even lead to death.

Is there a test for asthma?

Yes. Your doctor will ask you about your symptoms and have you do a breathing test to see how your lungs are working.

If your doctor thinks allergies might be making your asthma worse, they might suggest allergy testing. This can include skin tests or blood tests.

How is asthma treated?

Asthma is treated with different types of medicines. The medicines can be inhalers, liquids, or pills. Your doctor will prescribe medicine based on how often you have symptoms and how serious your symptoms are. Asthma medicines work in 1 of 2 ways:

- **Quick-relief medicines** stop symptoms quickly – in 5 to 15 minutes. Almost everyone with asthma has a quick-relief inhaler that they carry with them. People use these medicines whenever they have asthma symptoms. Most people need these medicines 1 or 2 times a week – or less often. But when asthma symptoms get worse, more doses might be needed. Some people can feel shaky after taking these medicines. A few people also need a machine called a "nebulizer" to breathe in their medicine.
- **Long-term controller medicines** control asthma and prevent future symptoms. People who get asthma symptoms more than 2 times a week need to use a controller medicine 1 or 2 times each day.

Controller medicines tend to take longer to work, sometimes a few weeks. So, it can be hard to tell if the medicine is working. Keep taking the medicine, but talk to your doctor or nurse if you do not feel a medicine working.

It is very important that you take all the medicines the doctor prescribes, exactly how you are supposed to take them. You might have to take medicines a few times a day. Your doctor or nurse will show you the right way to use your inhaler.

If your symptoms get much worse all of a sudden, use your quick relief medicine and contact your doctor or nurse. You might need to go to the hospital for treatment.

What is an asthma action plan?

An asthma action plan is a list of instructions that tell you:

- Which medicines to use each day at home
- Which medicines to take if your symptoms get worse
- When to get help or **call for an ambulance (in the US and Canada, dial 9-1-1)**

If you have frequent or severe asthma symptoms, your doctor might suggest that you have an asthma action plan. If so, you and your doctor will work together to make one. As part of your action plan, you might need to use something called a "peak flow meter." Breathing into this device will show how your lungs are working. Your doctor will show you the right way to use your peak flow meter.

Should I see a doctor or nurse?

Yes. See your doctor or nurse if you have asthma symptoms. And call your doctor or nurse if you have an asthma attack and the symptoms do not improve or get worse after using a quick-relief medicine.

If asthma symptoms are severe, **call for an ambulance (in the US and Canada, dial 9-1-1)**.

If you need asthma medicine every day, you should see your doctor or nurse every 6 months or more often.

Can asthma symptoms be prevented?

Yes. You can help prevent your asthma symptoms. You can stay away from things that cause your symptoms or make them worse. Doctors call these "triggers." If you know what your triggers are, avoid them as much as possible. Below are some common triggers, but your triggers might be different. Ask your doctor or nurse which are important for you:

- Cigarette smoke – Avoid places where people smoke. If you smoke, get help to quit.
- Exercise – Exercise can be good for people with asthma even if it is a trigger. But you might need to take an extra dose of your quick-relief inhaler medicine before you exercise. It might help to warm up before doing intense exercise. If you exercise outside on a very cold day, it can also help to wear a loose scarf or mask over your nose and mouth.
- Dust – Mattress and pillow covers can reduce dust mites.
- Mold – Use a dehumidifier or air conditioner to keep indoor air dry. Remove any mold you see.
- Certain animals – These can include dogs, cats, mice, or cockroaches. If you are allergic to animals or insects, try to figure out ways to avoid them.
- Pollen – Stay indoors when possible during pollen season. Keep your windows and doors closed whenever you can.

- Getting sick with a cold or flu – Make sure to get a flu shot every year. Some people also need to get a vaccine to help prevent pneumonia. If you think you might have been exposed to the flu, tell your doctor or nurse. They might prescribe special medicine (called "antiviral" medicine).
- Stress

Some adults with asthma have worse symptoms if they take [aspirin](#) or medicines called NSAIDs. NSAIDs include [ibuprofen](#) (sample brand names: Advil, Motrin) and [naproxen](#) (sample brand names: Aleve, Naprosyn). Ask your doctor if you need to avoid these medicines.

If you can't avoid certain triggers, talk with your doctor about what you can do. For example, you might need to take an extra dose of your quick-relief inhaler medicine before you exercise or are around pollen or animals you are allergic to.

What if I want to get pregnant?

If you want to get pregnant, talk to your doctor about how to control your asthma. Keeping your asthma well-controlled is important for the health of your baby. Most asthma medicines are safe to take if you are pregnant.