

Asthma

Learning to control your symptoms

What is asthma?

Asthma is a disease of the lungs. The airways of people with asthma are extra sensitive to things that they're allergic to (called allergens) and to other irritating things in the air (called irritants).

Asthma symptoms start when allergens or other irritants cause the lining of the airways to swell (become inflamed) and narrow. The muscles around the airways can then spasm, causing the airways to narrow even more. When the lining of the airways is inflamed, it produces more mucus. The mucus clogs the airways and further blocks the flow of air. This is called an “asthma attack.”

How is asthma treated?

Treatment involves avoiding things that cause asthma attacks, keeping track of your symptoms and taking medicine.

How can I avoid allergens and irritants?

If pollen and mold cause your symptoms, try to stay in air-conditioned places with the windows closed. Change the filter on your heating and cooling system frequently.

To keep mold down, clean and air out bathrooms, kitchens and basements often. Keep the level of humidity under 50%. You can do this with an air conditioner or a dehumidifier.

Things that may trigger an asthma attack

- Air pollution
- Aspirin, ibuprofen (some brand names: Advil, Motrin, Nuprin)
- Changes in temperature
- Dust
- Exercise
- Heartburn
- Mold
- Perfume
- Pets
- Pollen
- Sinus infections
- Some foods
- Spray-on deodorants
- Strong emotions
- Sulfite (food preservative in red wine, beer, dehydrated soups, salad bars, and other foods)
- Tobacco smoke
- Viruses



Pets can cause problems if you're allergic to them. If you have a pet, keep it out of your bedroom.

Don't allow smoking in your house or car. Tobacco smoke can make your asthma worse.

What about dust?

People who are allergic to dust are actually allergic to the dust mites that live in it. To reduce dust mites in your house, wash bedsheets weekly in hot water. Cover mattresses and pillows in airtight covers. And remove carpets and drapes. If you must have carpet, you can treat it with chemicals to help reduce dust mites. Try to avoid stuffed animals, dried flowers and other things that catch dust.

What is a peak flow meter?

A peak flow meter is a hand-held device that measures how fast you can blow air out of your lungs. Measuring your peak flow regularly can help you tell if your asthma is getting worse.

To use a peak flow meter, take a deep breath and blow as hard as you can into the mouthpiece. Do the test 3 times and write down your best result. This is called your "peak flow."

What medicines are used to treat asthma?

Asthma medicines can generally be divided into two groups: medicines to prevent attacks and medicines to treat attacks (sometimes called rescue medicines).

Your doctor will talk to you about these medicines and what to do if you have an asthma attack.

Warning signs of an asthma attack

- Peak flow 20% below your best
- Coughing or wheezing
- Shortness of breath
- Tightness in the chest

How do preventive medicines work?

Preventive medicines help reduce the swelling in your airways to prevent asthma attacks.

Preventive medicines include inhaled corticosteroids (some brand names: Azmacort, Beclovent, Flovent, etc.), cromolyn (brand: Intal) and nedocromil (brand: Tilade).

Newer medicines, called anti-leukotrienes, are also used to prevent asthma attacks. These include montelukast (brand: Singulair), zafirlukast (brand: Accolate) and zileuton (brand: Zyflo).

Preventive medicines must be taken on a regular basis—whether or not you're having symptoms. They take hours or days to start to help and don't work well unless you take them regularly.

How do rescue medicines work?

Rescue medicines provide quick relief during an asthma attack by helping the muscles around your airways relax, which allows your airways to open.

Inhaled bronchodilators are rescue medicines (some brand names: Brethaire, Proventil, Tornalate, etc.). They can be used on a regular basis or only when they are needed to quickly reduce symptoms.

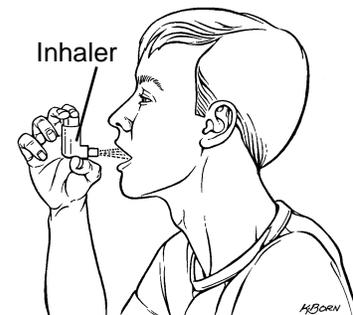
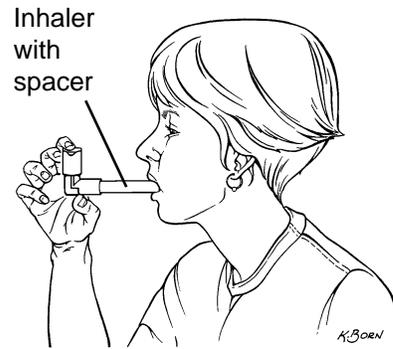
How do I use an inhaler?

Some asthma medicines are taken with a metered-dose inhaler. Your doctor will show you how to use an inhaler. Here are the basic steps:

1. Remove the cap and hold the inhaler upright.
2. Shake the canister.
3. Tilt your head back and breathe out.
4. Put the inhaler 1 to 2 inches away from your mouth. Or, if you're using a spacer, put the end of it in your mouth and seal your lips around it. (A spacer is a tube that you attach to your inhaler. It makes using an inhaler easier.)
5. Press down on the inhaler to release the medicine as you slowly breathe in for 3 to 5 seconds. (If you use inhaled dry powder capsules, close your mouth tightly around the mouthpiece of the inhaler and inhale rapidly.)
6. Hold your breath for 10 seconds so the medicine can get into your lungs.
7. Repeat as many times as your doctor suggests. Wait 1 minute between puffs.

How can I tell if my asthma is getting worse?

Signs that your asthma is getting worse include having symptoms at night, a drop in your peak flow and the need to use your bronchodilator more often. Talk to your doctor if you think that your asthma is getting worse.



Get help right away if:

- Your rescue medicine doesn't relieve your symptoms.
- Your peak flow keeps dropping after treatment or falls below 50% of your best.
- Your fingernails or lips turn gray or blue.
- You have trouble walking or talking.
- You have extreme difficulty breathing.
- Your neck, chest or ribs are pulled in with each breath.
- Your nostrils flare when you breathe.

Additional comments from your family doctor



The American Academy of Family Physicians Foundation has favorably reviewed this material. Favorable review means that medical information is accurate, but does not imply endorsement of any conclusions presented.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

The American Academy of Family Physicians provides health information on the World Wide Web at familydoctor.org.

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