

Asthma Basics

What is asthma?

Asthma is a chronic lung disease that makes it hard for you to breathe. Patients with asthma have very sensitive airways that are prone to swelling or inflammation. When the airways become inflamed, the muscles around the airways tend to constrict or tighten making it difficult for patients to breathe. Many patients with asthma have the airway inflammation all the time, even if they don't have symptoms all the time. For this reason, it is important that you think of asthma as a chronic condition that flares up at times due to exposure to various "triggers". Fortunately, we now have very effective medications that will help prevent and treat the asthma attacks.

Who gets asthma?

Anyone can get asthma, but it seems to run in families where there is a history of asthma, allergies or eczema. Others who are more likely to get asthma are people who were born prematurely and those with family members, especially mothers, who smoke. Asthma is more common in children than adults.

What are the symptoms of asthma?

The symptoms are not the same for everyone, so it is important to know what your own warning signs are. The most common warning signs are:

- Wheezing (making a whistling sound when you breathe)
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- A tightening in the chest
- Persistent cough, often worse at night

What causes an asthma attack?

Exposure to certain "triggers" will cause airway narrowing and symptoms. Some common triggers include:

- Colds or sinus infections
- Indoor and outdoor allergens, like dust mites, pet dander, or pollen
- Exercise
- Irritants like cigarette smoke or fumes from paint, cleansers etc.
- Strong emotions

Talk to your provider and be sure you understand your asthma triggers. The first step in controlling asthma is to **AVOID** your asthma triggers.

Is there a cure for asthma?

No. Some children with asthma seem to outgrow the problem during adolescence, but it will often recur in their twenties or thirties. While asthma cannot be cured, it can almost always be well controlled with proper treatment. This means avoiding triggers and taking the correct medications.



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What are the medicines for asthma?

There are two kinds of medicines for asthma: rescue medications to treat acute attacks and controller medications to prevent the symptoms in the first place. All asthmatics need to have the rescue medications available at all times. Patients having chronic symptoms (more than once or twice a week) or with frequent severe attacks also need a controller medication.

Rescue medications: Short-acting bronchodilators are used when symptoms are present to relax the muscles that tighten the airways, and usually relieve asthma symptoms quickly. They do not control the asthma or prevent further attacks, but only treat acute symptoms.

Controller medications: either **anti-inflammatory** or **long-acting bronchodilator**. These are used every day to prevent symptoms. The anti-inflammatory medications reduce the swelling or inflammation in the airways, thus making them less sensitive to the triggers and less likely to tighten or constrict. This leads to fewer and less severe asthma attacks. The long-acting bronchodilators are sometimes used *along with* the anti-inflammatory to help keep airways open in those patients with more severe asthma.

What are the goals of asthma treatment?

Patients with asthma should have minimal symptoms, and the asthma should have little if any impact on your lifestyle. Patients should rarely, if ever, need to miss work or school because of their asthma. There should be no need for trips to the urgent care clinic or the emergency room. Finally, rather than limiting activity out of fear it may cause an asthma attack, we encourage exercise as this helps to strengthen the heart and lungs and will help stabilize the airways in the long run.

Conclusion:

Good control of asthma can be achieved when you, your family and your doctor work as a team.

These steps will help control asthma:

- Prevent asthma attacks by avoiding triggers and by using your controller medications regularly
- Have a plan on what to do when your asthma flares
- Treat asthma symptoms quickly
- Know when to get medical help



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