

What Is Asthma? Asthma is defined as recurrent episodes of wheezing, breathlessness, chest tightness, and nighttime or early morning coughing. One episode of wheezing does not make you an asthmatic. It is a common long-term disease among children that causes the airways to become inflamed, which makes it hard to breathe. Chronic means that the disease is always there, it does not go away, even during times when you aren't having symptoms. There is no cure for asthma, but it can be controlled with proper management. The best way to manage asthma is to avoid triggers, use medications to prevent symptoms, and treat asthma attacks if they occur.

How Is Asthma Diagnosed? Asthma can be hard to diagnose, especially in children younger than 5 years of age. Regular checkups that include a thorough medical history and lung exam can help make the right diagnosis. When the diagnosis is in question, checking lung function tests and allergies may be helpful depending on the child's age. Wheezing isn't the only symptom of asthma. People with asthma can also ...

1. Cough a lot, especially at night
2. Have breathing problems that are worse after physical activity or during a particular time of year.
3. Complain of chest tightness
4. Have colds that last more than 10 days
5. Miss school or work because of trouble doing certain activities

What Is an Asthma Attack? An asthma attack/episode happens in your airways. During an asthma attack, the walls of the airways in your lungs swell and the airways shrink. Less air gets in and out of your lungs. In addition, the mucus that your body produces clogs up the airways even more. An acute attack may include coughing, chest tightness, wheezing, and trouble breathing.

What Causes an Asthma Attack? An asthma attack can occur when you are exposed to things in the environment that cause your airways to become inflamed. Below is a list of the most common triggers. Your personal triggers can be very different from those of another person with asthma. Nonetheless, in every case, it is important to avoid your triggers to keep down the inflammation in your airways and reduce your symptoms.

- **Environmental Tobacco Smoke (Secondhand Smoke):** Parents, friends, and relatives of children with asthma should try to stop smoking and should never smoke around a person with asthma. They should only smoke outdoors and not in the family home or car.
- **Dust Mites:** If you have asthma, dust mites may be a trigger for an attack. To help prevent asthma attacks, use mattress covers and pillowcase covers to make a barrier between dust mites and yourself. Don't use down-filled pillows, quilts, or comforters. Remove stuffed animals and clutter from your bedroom. For carpeted floors, make sure to vacuum often.
- **Animal Dander:** Furry pets may trigger an asthma attack. When a furry pet is suspected of causing asthma attacks, the simplest solution is to find the pet another home. However, alternative options include keeping the pet out of the bedroom of the person with asthma. Pets should be bathed weekly and kept outside as much as possible. People with asthma are not allergic to their pet's fur, so trimming your pet's fur will not help your asthma. If you have a furry pet, vacuum often to clean up

anything that could cause an asthma attack. If your floors have a hard surface, such as wood or tile, and are not carpeted, damp mop them every week.

- **Mold:** Inhaling or breathing in mold can cause an asthma attack. Get rid of mold in all parts of your home to help control your asthma attacks. Keep the humidity level in your home between 35% and 50%. In hot, humid climates, you may need to use an air conditioner, dehumidifier, or both. Fix water leaks, which allow mold to grow behind walls and under floors.
- **Pollen:** Seasonal allergies can be a trigger for asthma attacks. Reducing pollen exposure, taking baths and washing hair after exposure, keeping windows in the home closed, vacuuming weekly, and changing bedding often can help manage symptoms. You may also need to take an allergy medication like an antihistamine to help control your symptoms.

There are many other triggers such as respiratory infections, cold air, cockroach droppings, air pollution, some foods or food additives, physical activity, etc. Learn what triggers your attacks so that you can avoid the triggers whenever possible. Be alert for a possible attack when the triggers cannot be avoided.

How Do You Treat Asthma? Not everyone with asthma takes the same medicine. The type of medications you are prescribed depends on the severity of your asthma. Asthma medicines come in two types – quick relief and long-term control. Quick-relief medicines control the symptoms of an acute asthma attack. If you have frequent asthma attacks or use your quick-relief medication often (more than 2 days/week), your asthma may not be well controlled. If you need to use your quick-relief medicines more and more, you should call us to see if you need a long-term medication. Long-term medications help reduce the inflammation in your airways and cause you to have fewer and milder attacks, but they don't help you if you're having an acute asthma attack.

People with Asthma should have an **Asthma Action Plan**. An asthma action plan is a written plan that you develop with your doctor to help control your asthma. The asthma action plan shows your daily treatment to control your asthma long-term, but also outlines which medication and how much to take during an acute asthma attack. The plan explains when to call the doctor or go to the emergency room. If your child has asthma, all of the people who care for him or her should know about the child's asthma action plan.

How Often Do You Need to See Your Doctor? As discussed above, asthma is a chronic condition. It is still there even if you do not have active symptoms. Asthma can change over time, so it is important to have regular visits with the doctor to keep asthma well controlled.

You can learn more about asthma action plans from the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute at http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/lung/asthma/asthma_actplan.htm