



► [Return to Web version](#)

## Asthma and Your Child

### How do I know if my child has asthma?

Your child may have asthma if he or she wheezes, coughs and has trouble breathing. These symptoms may get worse when your child gets sick, exercises or is exposed to certain triggers and irritants (see below). Your child's doctor will look for other reasons for these symptoms before diagnosing asthma.

[Return to top](#)

### What is an asthma attack?

An asthma attack occurs when mucus clogs up your child's air tubes. The excess mucus causes your child's air tubes to swell and tighten. Asthma attacks can be mild, moderate or severe.

If your child has an asthma attack, he or she may experience the following symptoms:

- Tightening of the chest
- Cough with mucus
- Wheezing or whistling sound when breathing
- Difficulty breathing and talking
- Trouble sleeping

### Is there anything I can do to help my child avoid asthma attacks?

You can help your child avoid asthma attacks by keeping him or her away from triggers (also called allergens) and irritants that can start an asthma attack. The following are some examples of triggers and irritants:

- Air pollution
- Dust
- Mold
- Pollen
- Tobacco smoke

- Pet dander
- Exercise
- Changes in temperature
- Certain foods
- Sulfite (food preservative in red wine, beer, salad bars, dehydrated soups, and other foods)
- Aspirin, or ibuprofen (brand names: Advil, Motrin, Nuprin)
- Heartburn
- Sinus infections
- Strong emotions (such as crying or laughing)
- Perfume
- Spray-on deodorants
- Viruses

[Return to top](#)

### **How can I help my child avoid asthma triggers?**

If pollen and mold cause your child's symptoms, use your air-conditioner and try to keep the windows of your home and car closed. Change the filter on your heating and cooling system frequently.

To keep mold down, clean and air out bathrooms, kitchens and basements often. Use an air conditioner or dehumidifier to keep the level of humidity under 50%.

People who are allergic to dust are actually allergic to the droppings of dust mites. To reduce dust mites in your home, wash bedsheets weekly in hot water (above 130°F). 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 trap dust.

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

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

[Return to top](#)

### **How can I tell if my child's asthma is serious?**

Have your child use a peak flow meter every day. A peak flow meter measures how much air flows out of your child's lungs. People who have asthma have lower air flow in and out of their lungs than other people. Measuring peak flow levels can help you see problems with your child's air flow before he or she has any symptoms of asthma.

A meter can also help tell you and your doctor how serious your child's asthma



attacks are. You'll be able to see when your child should take medicine or when you need emergency care for your child. Peak flow readings may also help you find the triggers that make your child's asthma symptoms worse.

[Return to top](#)

## How is a peak flow meter used?

To use a peak flow meter, your child should follow these steps:

1. Move the indicator to the bottom of the numbered scale.
2. Stand up.
3. Take a deep breath.
4. Close his or her lips around the mouthpiece of the flow meter. His or her tongue should not go inside the tube.
5. Blow out as hard and fast as possible.

The indicator on the meter will move up. Write down the number where it stops. Have your child repeat steps 1 through 5 two more times. Write down the highest of the three numbers on the peak flow meter record chart.

Your doctor will tell you when to have your child use the peak flow meter and how to find out your child's "personal best" score. The personal best score is the highest score your child gets in two weeks of recording, when his or her asthma is under good control. After you know your child's personal best score, compare your child's daily peak flow score with his or her personal best score.

[Return to top](#)

## What is the peak flow zone system?

Once you know your child's personal best peak flow score, your doctor can tell you how to do the next step. Peak flow scores are put in "zones" like the colors in traffic lights.

**Green Zone:** This is a score that is 80% to 100% of the personal best score. It signals that your child's asthma is under control. No symptoms are present, but your child should take his or her preventative asthma medicines as usual.

**Yellow Zone:** This is a score that is 50% to 80% of the personal best score. It signals that your child's asthma is getting worse. Your child may be coughing or wheezing frequently. He or she may need extra asthma medicine. Follow your doctor's written instructions or call your doctor for advice.

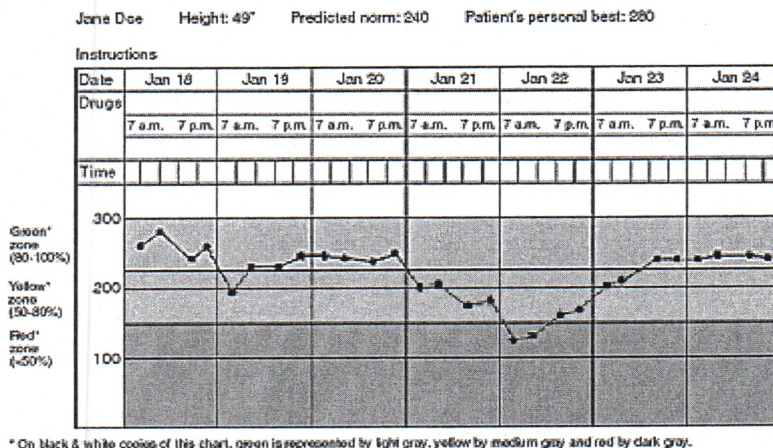
**Red Zone:** This is a score that is below 50% of the personal best score. It signals a medical emergency. Your child may have severe coughing, wheezing and shortness of breath, and his or her lips and fingernails may be turning a grayish or bluish color. Have your child use an inhaler or other medicine to open his or her airways right away. Call your doctor immediately for more advice.



Below is a sample of a peak flow meter record chart. You may mark your child's daily scores on a similar graph to see whether your child's asthma is in the green zone, the yellow zone or the red zone.

[Return to top](#)

## Sample peak flow chart



Adapted from "Teach your patients about asthma. A clinician's guide." Bethesda, Md.: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, 1992; DHHS publication no. 92-2737.

[Return to top](#)

## Can my child's asthma be treated?

Yes, there are 2 different kinds of medicines that people who have asthma can take. One kind is used to stop an asthma attack. This medicine is called a bronchodilator and helps when your child has already started having trouble breathing. It opens up tight airways and stops the swelling.

The other kind of medicine is used to prevent your child from having an asthma attack. This medicine is called an anti-inflammatory and keeps the airways from swelling. Your child will have to take this medicine every day. Your child's doctor will help you decide which medicine is best for your child.

[Return to top](#)

## Other Organizations

- [American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology](http://www.aaaai.org)  
800-822-2762

- [Revolution Health Asthma Community](http://www.revolutionhealth.com/forums/asthma-allergies)  
<http://www.revolutionhealth.com/forums/asthma-allergies>

[Return to top](#)

## **Source**

[Written by familydoctor.org editorial staff.](#)

American Academy of Family Physicians

Reviewed/Updated: 09/08

Created: 09/00

[Copyright © 2000-2008 American Academy of Family Physicians](#)