



[Return to Web version](#)

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 the things 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, (contract rapidly), 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."

[Return to top](#)

How do I control my asthma symptoms?

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

[Return to top](#)

How can I avoid allergens and irritants?

If pollen and mold cause your 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. Keep the level of humidity under 50%. You can do this with an air conditioner or a dehumidifier.

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 catch dust.

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.

[Return to top](#)

How do I control my asthma symptoms?

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

[Return to top](#)

Things that can trigger an asthma attack

- Air pollution
- Dust
- Mold
- Pollen
- Tobacco smoke
- Pet dander
- Exercise
- Changes in temperature
- Some 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
- Perfume
- Spray-on deodorants
- Viruses

[Return to top](#)

What is a peak flow meter?

A peak flow meter is a hand-held device that measures your peak expiratory flow rate (PEFR), or how fast you can blow air out of your lungs. Measuring your peak

flow regularly can help you tell whether your asthma is getting worse.

To use a peak flow meter, you will first need to find out your "personal best" peak flow. Take a deep breath and blow as hard as you can into the mouthpiece. Your personal best is the highest reading you get on the meter over a 2-week period when your asthma is under good control.

[Return to top](#)

What medicines are used to treat asthma?

Asthma medicines can generally be divided into two groups: medicines to prevent attacks, (controller medicines), 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.

[Return to top](#)

How do controller medicines work?

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

Controller medicines include inhaled corticosteroids (some brand names: Azmacort, AeroBid, Flovent, etc.), cromolyn (one brand name: Intal) and nedocromil (brand name: Tilade).

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

Controller 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.

[Return to top](#)

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: Brethine, Proventil, Tonalate, etc.). They can be used on a regular basis or only when they are needed to quickly reduce symptoms.

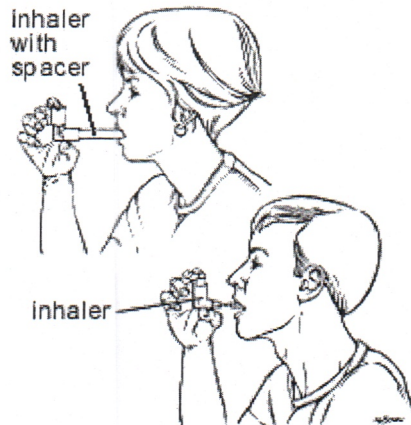
Warning signs of an asthma attack

- Peak flow less than 50% of your personal best
- Coughing or wheezing
- Shortness of breath

[Return to top](#)

- **Tightness in chest**

How do I use an inhaler?



Using 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.

[Return to top](#)

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 rescue medicine more often. Talk to your doctor if you think that your asthma is getting worse.

[Return to top](#)

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.
-

[Return to top](#)

Other Organizations

- [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: 05/07

Created: 03/05

[Copyright © 2005-2008 American Academy of Family Physicians](#)

American Academy of Family Physicians
presents KidsHealth
on familydoctor.org

familydoctor.org

How Can I Deal With My Asthma?

Asthma is more common these days than it used to be. The good news is it's also a lot easier to manage and control.

Since more teens have asthma, you're probably used to seeing people take a break from sports to use an inhaler or take a moment after school to test their airflow with a peak flow meter. But even though asthma is a part of so many people's daily lives, there are times when they can feel annoyed or frustrated at having asthma — just as they get annoyed or frustrated by anything else.

Different people have different reactions to the ways that asthma affects their lives. For example, some worry that they might have to avoid all physical activities — even those approved by their doctors — and miss out on fun. Others go to the opposite extreme, denying they have asthma at all and maybe forgetting or refusing to take the medications that can control it. Still others find that asthma is a convenient excuse to get out of chores or gym class.

Taking Action

If you have asthma and don't want it to have control over you, take control first.

The best tool for controlling asthma is something your doctor gives you called an asthma action plan. Following all the steps described in an action plan allows people with asthma to enjoy daily activities just like everyone else.

Your asthma action plan offers you the best protection against potentially dangerous (not to mention embarrassing) episodes — such as having an asthma attack at a party where people are smoking.

Unfortunately, people may not always stick with their plan for lots of different reasons. Maybe they forget to take medications. Perhaps they don't completely understand why they're supposed to take certain steps or medications. A few might feel embarrassed about checking their airflow or using an inhaler in front of others. And some may mistakenly think they don't need medicine after they start feeling better — putting them at risk for potentially dangerous flare-ups.

Here are some simple steps that can help you get around these common problems:

- **Understand your plan.** Ask your doctor to explain why each medication and step of the plan is important. You'll feel more in control if you understand exactly what's going on and what will happen if you follow (or don't follow) your plan. Check in with your doctor often and go over the plan, explaining where you may have had trouble with it and why.
- **Use asthma management tools.** Even if you're feeling absolutely fine, don't abandon tools like daily controller medicines and peak flow meters if they're a part of your treatment plan. Although it can be tempting to skip recommended daily meds and rely only on occasional rescue medicines, this usually doesn't work.

- **Set up a schedule.** It can be easy to slip up and forget to take a medication — but this is less likely to happen if you follow the steps on your action plan at the same time every day. Make your medicine part of your daily routine, like brushing your teeth.
- **Don't smoke.** Cigarette smoke is a common cause of asthma aggravation in teens. Talk to your parent or a doctor about how to quit if you smoke. If your friends smoke, don't stand nearby when they light up because secondhand smoke is a common trigger of asthma attacks. If someone in your family smokes, talk with him or her about quitting.
- **Control your environment.** Environmental triggers, such as dust mites and pet dander, can be hazardous if you have asthma. If you have pets, keep Fido or Fluffy out of your room. Also, try to keep your room dust free by cleaning it regularly, and talk to your doctor about using special mattress and pillow covers.
- **Find a sport or activity that works for you.** Some sports, such as swimming and baseball, are less likely to trigger asthma flare-ups. Other sports may be more challenging for people with asthma, like endurance or cold-weather sports. Many athletes have found that with proper training and medication, they can participate in any sport they choose. Sports can boost your mood — a great help for those times when you may feel frustrated about having asthma.

Using a management plan to deal with asthma is good for more than your health. Getting used to following an asthma action plan can give you the discipline to stick with a plan and succeed in other areas of life as well.

Reviewed by: Elana Pearl Ben Joseph, MD
Date reviewed: May 2007

[Editorial Policy](#) | [Privacy Policy & Terms of Use](#) | [Copyright](#)

Note: All information is for educational purposes only. For specific medical advice, diagnoses, and treatment, consult your doctor.

© 1995- 2008 KidsHealth. All rights reserved.

