

ASTHMA

Definition

Asthma is a condition in which your airways narrow and swell and produce extra mucus. This can make breathing difficult and trigger coughing, wheezing and shortness of breath.

For some people, asthma is a minor nuisance. For others, it can be a major inconvenience and may lead to a life-threatening asthma attack.

Asthma can't be cured, but its symptoms can be controlled. Because asthma often changes over time, it's important that you work with your doctor to track your signs and symptoms and adjust treatment as needed.

Symptoms

Asthma symptoms range from minor to severe and vary from person to person. You may have infrequent asthma attacks, have symptoms only at certain times — such as when exercising — or have symptoms all the time.

Asthma signs and symptoms include:

- Shortness of breath.
- Chest tightness or pain.
- Trouble sleeping caused by shortness of breath, coughing or wheezing.
- A whistling or wheezing sound when exhaling (wheezing is a common sign of asthma in children).
- Coughing or wheezing attacks that are worsened by a respiratory virus, such as a cold or the flu.

Signs that your asthma is probably worsening include:

- Asthma signs and symptoms that are more frequent and bothersome.
- Increasing difficulty breathing (measurable with a peak flow meter, a device used to check how well your lungs are working).
- The need to use a quick-relief inhaler more often.

For some people, asthma symptoms flare up in certain situations:

- Exercise-induced asthma, which may be worse when the air is cold and dry.
- Occupational asthma, triggered by workplace irritants such as chemical fumes, gases or dust.
- Allergy-induced asthma, triggered by allergens, such as pet dander, cockroaches or pollen.

When to see a doctor

Seek emergency treatment

Severe asthma attacks can be life-threatening. Work with your doctor ahead of time to determine what to do when your signs and symptoms worsen — and when you need emergency treatment. Signs of an asthma emergency include:

- Rapid worsening of shortness of breath or wheezing.
- No improvement even after using a quick-relief inhaler, such as albuterol.
- Shortness of breath when you are doing minimal physical activity.

Contact your doctor

See your doctor:

- If you think you have asthma: See your doctor if you have frequent coughing or wheezing that lasts more than a few days or any other signs or symptoms of asthma. Treating asthma early may prevent long-term lung damage and help keep the condition from worsening over time.
- To monitor your asthma after diagnosis: If you know you have asthma, work with your doctor to keep it under control. Good long-term control helps you feel better daily and can prevent a life-threatening asthma attack.
- If your asthma symptoms get worse: Contact your doctor right away if your medication doesn't seem to ease your symptoms or if you need to use your quick-relief inhaler more often. Don't try to solve the problem by taking more medication without consulting your doctor. Overusing asthma medication can cause side effects and may make your asthma worse.
- To review your treatment: Asthma often changes over time. Meet with your doctor on a regular basis to discuss your symptoms and make any needed treatment adjustments.

Causes

It isn't clear why some people get asthma and others don't, but it's probably due to a combination of environmental conditions.

Asthma triggers

Exposure to various substances that trigger allergies (allergens) and irritants can trigger signs and symptoms of asthma. Asthma triggers are different from person to person and can include:

- Airborne allergens, such as pollen, animal dander, mold, cockroaches and dust mites.
- Respiratory infections, such as the common cold.
- Physical activity (exercise-induced asthma).
- Cold air.
- Air pollutants and irritants, such as smoke.
- Certain medications, including beta blockers, aspirin, ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin IB, others) and naproxen (Aleve).
- Strong emotions and stress.
- Sulfites and preservatives added to some types of foods and beverages, including shrimp, dried fruit, processed potatoes, beer and wine.
- Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GORD), a condition in which stomach acids back up into your throat.
- Menstrual cycle in some women.

Risk factors

Many factors are thought to increase your chances of developing asthma. These include:

- Having a blood relative (such as a parent or sibling) with asthma.
- Having another allergic condition, such as atopic dermatitis or allergic rhinitis (hay fever).
- Being overweight.
- Being a smoker.
- Exposure to second-hand smoke.
- Having a mother who smoke while pregnant.
- Exposure to exhaust fumes or other types of pollution.
- Exposure to occupational triggers, such as chemicals used in farming, hairdressing and manufacturing.

Exposure to allergens, exposure to certain germs or parasites, and having some types of bacterial or viral infections also may be risk factors. However, more research is needed to determine what role they may play in developing asthma.

Complications

Asthma complications include:

- Symptoms that interfere with sleep, work or recreational activities.
- Sick days from work or school during asthma flare-ups.
- Permanent narrowing of the bronchial tubes (airway remodeling) that affects how well you can breathe.
- Emergency room visits and hospitalizations for severe asthma attacks.

- Side effects from long-term use of some medications used to stabilize severe asthma.

Proper treatment makes a big difference in preventing both short-term and long-term complications caused by asthma.

You're likely to start by seeing your family doctor or a general practitioner. However, when you call to set up an appointment, you may be referred to an allergist or a pulmonologist.

Because appointments can be brief, and because there's often a lot of ground to cover, it's a good idea to be well prepared. Here's some information to help you get ready for your appointment, as well as what to expect from your doctor.

How asthma is classified

To classify your asthma severity, your doctor considers your answers to questions about symptoms (such as how often you have asthma attacks and how bad they are), along with the results of your physical exam and diagnostic tests.

Determining your asthma severity helps your doctor choose the best treatment. Asthma severity often changes over time, requiring treatment adjustments.

Asthma is classified into four general categories:

Asthma classification	Signs and symptoms
Mild intermittent	Mild symptoms up to two days a week and up to two nights a month.
Mild persistent	Symptoms more than twice a week, but no more than once in a single day.
Moderate persistent	Symptoms once a day and more than one night a week.
Severe persistent	Symptoms throughout the day on most days and frequently at night.

Lifestyle and home remedies

Although many people with asthma rely on medications to prevent and relieve symptoms, you can do several things on your own to maintain your health and lessen the possibility of asthma attacks.

Avoid your triggers

Taking steps to reduce your exposure to things that trigger asthma symptoms is a key part of asthma control. It may help to:

- Use your air conditioner. Air conditioning reduces the amount of airborne pollen from trees, grasses and weeds that find its way indoors. Air conditioning also lowers indoor humidity and can reduce your exposure to dust mites. If you don't have air conditioning, try to keep your windows closed during pollen season.

- Decontaminate your décor: Minimize dust that may worsen night-time symptoms by replacing certain items in your bedroom. For example, encase pillows, mattresses and box springs in dustproof covers.
- Remove carpeting and install hardwood or linoleum flooring. Use washable curtains and blinds.
- Maintain optimal humidity: If you live in a damp climate, talk to your doctor about using a dehumidifier.
- Prevent mould spores: Clean damp areas in the bath, kitchen and around the house to keep mould spores from developing. Get rid of mouldy leaves or damp firewood in the yard.
- Reduce pet dander: If you're allergic to dander, avoid pets with fur or feathers. Having pets regularly bathed or groomed also may reduce the amount of dander in your surroundings.
- Clean regularly: Clean your home at least once a week. If you're likely to stir up dust, wear a mask or have someone else do the cleaning.
- Cover your nose and mouth if it's cold out: If your asthma is worsened by cold or dry air, wearing a face mask can help.

Stay healthy

Taking care of yourself and treating other conditions linked to asthma will help keep your symptoms under control. For example:

- Get regular exercise: Having asthma doesn't mean you must be less active. Treatment can prevent asthma attacks and control symptoms during activity. Regular exercise can strengthen your heart and lungs, which helps relieve asthma symptoms. If you exercise in cold temperatures, wear a face mask to warm the air you breathe.
- Maintain a healthy weight: Being overweight can worsen asthma symptoms, and it puts you at higher risk of other health problems.
- Eat fruits and vegetables: Eating plenty of fruits and vegetables may increase lung function and reduce asthma symptoms. These foods are rich in protective nutrients (antioxidants) that boost the immune system.
- Control heartburn and gastroesophageal reflux disease (GORD): It's possible that the acid reflux that causes heartburn may damage lung airways and worsen asthma symptoms. If you have frequent or constant heartburn, talk to your doctor about treatment options. You may need treatment for GORD before your asthma symptoms improve.

Alternative medicine

Certain alternative treatments may help with asthma symptoms. However, keep in mind that these treatments are not a replacement for medical treatment — especially if you have severe asthma. Talk to your doctor before taking any herbs or supplements, as some may interact with medications you take.

While some alternative remedies are used for asthma, in most cases more research is needed to see how well they work and to measure the extent of possible side effects.

Alternative asthma treatments include:

- Breathing techniques: These exercises may reduce the amount of medication you need to keep your asthma symptoms under control. Yoga classes increase fitness and reduce stress, which may help with asthma as well.
- Acupuncture: This technique involves placing very thin needles at strategic points on your body. It's safe and generally painless.
- Relaxation techniques: Techniques such as meditation, biofeedback, hypnosis and progressive muscle relaxation may help with asthma by reducing tension and stress.
- Herbal and natural remedies: A few herbal and natural remedies that may help improve asthma symptoms include caffeine, magnesium and pycnogenol. Blends of different types of herbs are commonly used in traditional Chinese, Indian and Japanese medicine. However, more studies are needed to determine how well herbal remedies and preparations work for asthma.

Omega-3 fatty acids: Found in fish, flaxseed and other foods, these healthy oils may reduce the inflammation that leads to asthma symptoms.

Coping and support

- Asthma can be challenging and stressful. You may sometimes become frustrated, angry or depressed because you need to cut back on your usual activities to avoid environmental triggers. You may also feel limited or embarrassed by the symptoms of the disease and by complicated management routines.
- But asthma doesn't have to be a limiting condition. The best way to overcome anxiety and a feeling of helplessness is to understand your condition and take control of your treatment. Here are some suggestions that may help:
- Pace yourself: Take breaks between tasks and avoid activities that make your symptoms worse.
- Make a daily to-do list: This may help you avoid feeling overwhelmed. Reward yourself for accomplishing simple goals.

- Talk to others with your condition: Chat rooms and message boards on the Internet or support groups in your area can connect you with people facing similar challenges and let you know you're not alone.
- If your child has asthma, be encouraging: Focus attention on the things your child can do, not on the things he or she can't. Involve teachers, school nurses, coaches, friends and relatives in helping your child manage asthma.
- Without first talking to your doctor. It's a good idea to bring your medications with you to each doctor visit, so your doctor can double-check that you're using your medications correctly and taking the right dose.
- Pay attention to increasing quick-relief inhaler use : If you find yourself relying on your quick-relief inhaler, such as albuterol, your asthma isn't under control. See your doctor about adjusting your treatment.

Source: The Mayo Clinic

Prevention

- While there's no way to prevent asthma, by working together, you and your doctor can design a step-by-step plan for living with your condition and preventing asthma attacks.
- Follow your asthma action plan: Together with your doctor and health care team, write a detailed plan for taking medications and managing an asthma attack. Then be sure to follow your plan. Asthma is an ongoing condition that needs regular monitoring and treatment. Taking control of your treatment can make you feel more in control of your life in general.
- Get vaccinated for influenza and pneumonia: Staying current with vaccinations can prevent flu and pneumonia from triggering asthma flare-ups.
- Identify and avoid asthma triggers: Many outdoor allergens and irritants — ranging from pollen and mould to cold air and air pollution — can trigger asthma attacks. Find out what causes or worsens your asthma, and take steps to avoid those triggers.
- Monitor your breathing: You may learn to recognize warning signs of an impending attack, such as slight coughing, wheezing or shortness of breath. But because your lung function may decrease before you notice any signs or symptoms, regularly measure and record your peak airflow with a home peak flow meter.
- Identify and treat attacks early: If you act quickly, you're less likely to have a severe attack. You also won't need as much medication to control your symptoms.
- When your peak flow measurements decrease and alert you to an oncoming attack, take your medication as instructed and immediately stop any activity that may have triggered the attack. If your symptoms don't improve, get medical help as directed in your action plan.
- Take your medication as prescribed: Just because your asthma seems to be improving, don't change anything.

Contact us

Please feel free to contact your Aon Healthcare Consultant if you have any concerns. You may also contact the **Aon Resolution Centre on 0860 835 272 or e-mail: arc@aon.co.za** for further information.

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