Intermountain® Healthcare

Asthma Symptoms and Triggers

Controlling asthma

You have asthma — but that doesn't mean you can't do all the things you enjoy doing. Working with your doctor, you can control your asthma. The key for you is to:

- Know your **symptoms**
- Avoid your **triggers**
- Take your **medication** correctly
- Follow your **Asthma Action Plan** every day
- Check your **asthma control** regularly

This fact sheet reviews the first two parts of this strategy, recognizing symptoms and avoiding asthma triggers.

Why focus on symptoms and triggers?

Before you can control your asthma, you first need to be able to recognize your symptoms and what seems to cause (trigger) them. Focusing on symptoms and triggers will help you:

- **Know when your asthma is — and isn't — in control.** Many people think their asthma is better controlled than it really is. They've had symptoms so long, they may think of them as normal.
- **Take early action to avoid or ease an asthma flare-up.** People with asthma are sometimes surprised by symptoms that flare up without warning. This can be frustrating — and in some cases, dangerous.

Every person is different and so is their asthma. Read through the information in this handout, then use the last page to write down what you've learned about how asthma affects you. These are important first steps for gaining control over your asthma.

Common asthma symptoms

The list at right describes some common asthma symptoms. They're listed in order, from bad to worse, as you might experience them during a worsening asthma flare-up.

A persistent cough, a whistling sound when you breathe, tightness in your chest, trouble catching your breath — these are common symptoms of asthma.

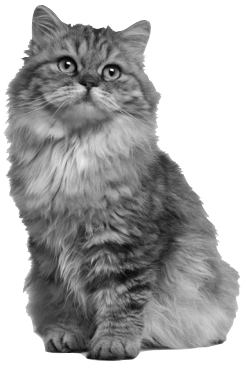
What are your symptoms? What seems to trigger them?

- **Coughing.** The first thing you might notice is a persistent (ongoing) cough. Nighttime coughing is especially common.
- **Wheezing.** You may hear a high-pitched whistling sound as you breathe out or in. This wheezing means that the air is having trouble moving through your airways.
- **Difficulty breathing, chest tightness.** As breathing becomes difficult, you may feel chest pain or tightness.
- **Shallow breathing.** You may find it difficult to take a deep breath.
- **Fast breathing.** As your breathing becomes shallower, it may also get faster. Fast breathing for young children is 50 or more breaths a minute while at rest. Adults and older children are breathing fast if they're taking 30 or more breaths a minute while at rest.
- **Retractions.** As an asthma flare-up worsens, the skin and muscles between the ribs and at the base of the throat may pull in or "retract" with each breath in. This sign is most often seen in children and means that they are really struggling to breathe.
- **Life-threatening symptoms.** If an asthma flare-up becomes very severe, retractions and wheezing may actually begin to go away. Breathing will become very shallow, and, because your body isn't getting enough oxygen, your face and lips may turn slightly blue. *Symptoms like these are very dangerous and require immediate emergency care.*

Common asthma triggers

A **trigger** is anything — a condition, a substance, an activity — that causes inflammation in your airways. A trigger makes your asthma worse or keeps it from getting better. As with symptoms, asthma triggers vary from person to person. Use the table below to identify your personal triggers and learn how to avoid them.

Common asthma TRIGGER	What you can do to AVOID or eliminate this trigger
RESPIRATORY INFECTIONS **Colds**, **influenza** (the **flu**), **sinus infections** and other illnesses can trigger an asthma flare-up. These illnesses also tend to last longer if you have asthma.	**Preventing illness is the key.** • Get plenty of rest, eat healthily, and exercise regularly. • Avoid being around people who are sick, and wash your hands often. • Get a flu shot once a year in the fall.
EXERCISE Exercise — a common trigger — can bring on coughing, wheezing, or shortness of breath. Still, when your symptoms are well controlled, **exercise is good for your lungs. It's one trigger you should NOT avoid**.	**You should be able to be active without symptoms. Talk to your doctor. Your doctor may recommend the following strategies:** • Take medication 5 to 10 minutes before you begin exercise. • Warm up for 10 minutes before exercise. • Get some aerobic exercise every day. Aerobic exercise is anything that gets your heart pumping a little faster, daily.
WEATHER A sudden **blast of cold air**, **excess heat** and **humidity**, and **dry climates** can all trigger asthma symptoms.	• In the cold: Dress appropriately. Wear a scarf (or a special asthma mask) over your nose and mouth to keep your breath warm and moist. Breathe in through your nose to warm the air. • In heat and humidity: Use air conditioning in your home and in your car. Drink plenty of fluids.
EMOTIONAL STRESS Emotions don't cause asthma, but **strong reactions like laughing, crying, and sighing** may trigger symptoms. **Family and job-related stresses** can also bring on symptoms.	• Try to stay calm and relaxed. • Take deep breaths. • Consciously slow your breathing by counting while you breathe in and out. • Do any activity that distracts and relaxes you.
SLEEP Asthma symptoms that occur at night are called **nocturnal asthma**. It can be brought on by **allergens in the bedroom**, a **drop in body temperature**, and **heartburn** (GERD, gastroesophageal reflux disease).	**Try to find out why your asthma is worse at night, then eliminate those causes.** • Keep your bedroom clear of allergens and follow your Asthma Action Plan. • Treat gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). • If you often have asthma symptoms at night, your asthma is not controlled. Contact your doctor for an adjustment to your treatment plan.
MEDICATIONS Some medications —for example **beta blockers** or those that contain **aspirin** — may cause symptoms.	• Consult with your healthcare provider or pharmacist before you take medications other than the ones that have been prescribed for your asthma.
IRRITANTS IN THE AIR **Tobacco smoke** is among the worst airborne irritants. **Wood-burning fireplaces, kerosene heaters, and gas stoves** — along with **industrial and exhaust fumes, aerosol sprays, perfumes, fumes from paint, glues, and household cleaning products** — can also cause problems.	• Don't allow smoking in your home or car. If you smoke, quit. • Watch the news for pollution alerts (high-ozone days), and be ready to step up your treatment if necessary. • Get rid of your swamp cooler. Use central air conditioning instead. • Don't use wood burning stoves, fireplaces, or kerosene heaters at home. • Avoid perfumes and perfumed products such as candles, and hairspray. • Consider a HEPA filter to clean the air in your home.

Common asthma TRIGGER		What you can do to AVOID or eliminate this trigger
ALLERGENS Allergens are things that cause you to have an allergic reaction. In some people, allergens also trigger asthma flare-ups. Common allergens include **animal dander, pollen, molds, dust mites, cockroach droppings, and certain foods and food additives,** all of which can trigger asthma symptoms.	**Animal dander**. People aren't actually allergic to animal fur, but a protein found in pet dander (flakes of skin) and saliva. **Even a short-haired animal or an animal that doesn't shed will deposit dander.**	• If possible, remove the animal from your home. Avoid visits to homes of families or friends with pets. • At a minimum, keep pets off of the bed and out of the bedroom. • Block heating vents, or place filters over them. • When possible, remove cloth-covered furniture from your home. • Replace carpets with solid surface flooring. • Consider a HEPA filter to clean the air in your home. 
	Pollens are powder-like substances produced by blooming plants. If your asthma worsens at particular times of the year — you have "**hay fever**" or **sneezing, itchy nose or eyes —** pollen may be a trigger for you.	• Keep windows in your house and car closed. • Use central air conditioning or a room air conditioner — not a swamp cooler — to stay cool indoors. • During allergy seasons, limit outdoor activities on windy days and when pollen counts are high. • Keep lawns short to minimize flowering. Keep your yard free of weeds.
	Molds grow in warm, damp, and poorly lit places — like a bathroom, closet, basement, and even behind wallpaper — and may cause asthma symptoms.	• Get rid of your swamp cooler. Use central air conditioning instead. • Install exhaust fans to increase ventilation in damp areas. • Regularly clean mold-prone areas with a cleaner that has bleach in it. • Limit the number of house plants you keep in your home. • Shake excess water off of shower curtains. • If your home has persistent mold growth from water damage, replace the damaged area.
	Dust mites and **cockroaches.** Both are uncommon in the West.	• Wash linens and stuffed toys once a week in HOT water to kill dust mites. • Keep food covered, counter tops clean, and remove garbage daily. • Set bait traps or use professional pest control services. Spray insecticides, but only when the person with asthma is out of the house. • Put airtight covers on mattresses, box springs, pillows, and comforters. • Replace carpet with flooring and upholstered furniture with leather or vinyl.
	Certain foods and food additives that can trigger allergic reactions and asthma symptoms. **Eggs, milk, wheat, soy, fish, corn, seafood, nuts,** and **peanuts** are common culprits, as are **sulfites,** an additive found in processed foods and drinks.	• Read ingredient labels, and avoid food that's causing your symptoms. • Ask questions at restaurants. • Ask your healthcare providers what to do in case you are accidentally exposed to food allergens. (You may need to carry special medication in case of an exposure.)

Keep in mind: symptoms vary

As you try to understand how asthma affects you, remember that symptoms vary from person to person and from time to time. Consider these factors:

- **Type:** What type of symptoms do you usually have? For some people with asthma, breathing becomes difficult. Yet for many others, coughing is the only symptom.
- **Time:** When do you have symptoms? You may experience symptoms only at night. Or, you may only notice symptoms at certain times of the year. Do you get them when you're active, or at rest?
- **Duration:** How long do symptoms last, and how often do you have them? Your symptoms may last only for a few minutes, or continue for a few days. You might have them every day, or they may flare up unexpectedly and get worse quickly.
- **Severity:** How do your symptoms affect your life? Are they just a bother — or do they stop you from doing the things you want to do?

Early warning signs?

People with asthma sometimes say that they can tell when their asthma is starting to flare up — even before they get one of the classic symptoms like coughing or wheezing.

Here are some of the "early warning signs" that people have reported:

- Sighing a lot
- Getting "the look" — a tense, worried face or circles under the eyes
- Having a "tickle" in the throat, or clearing the throat frequently
- A "full" feeling in the chest, and difficulty taking a deep breath

Pay attention to your body. You might be able to pick up on one of your own early warning signs of a flare-up. This can help you begin treatment early, and prevent more serious symptoms.

SYMPTOMS & TRIGGERS: take them personally

Understanding your asthma — how it affects you and what triggers it — is the first step in controlling it. Use the space below to write down what you observe about your own symptoms and triggers.

What are YOUR symptoms?

Type: _____

Time: _____

Duration: _____

Severity: _____

What are YOUR triggers?

(Check all that apply, then add notes about steps you can take to avoid that trigger.)

❒ Respiratory (cold, flu, sinus): _____
_____

❒ Exercise (wheezing, shortness of breath): _____
_____

❒ Weather (sudden blast of cold air, heat, humidity):
_____

❒ Emotional stress (from laughing, crying, sighing, family and job stress): _____
_____

❒ Sleep (allergens, body temperature, heartburn): _____
_____

❒ Medications (aspirin, beta blockers): _____
_____

❒ Air irritants (smoke, pollution, odors, fumes, sprays:
_____
_____

❒ Allergens (animal dander, pollen, molds, dust mites, cockroach droppings, food additives): _____
_____
_____

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