

# 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 by:

- Knowing your symptoms
- Avoiding your triggers
- Taking your medicine correctly
- Following your Asthma Action Plan every day
- Checking your asthma control regularly

This fact sheet covers the first 2 parts of this strategy: recognizing symptoms and avoiding asthma triggers.

## Recognizing 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 for 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.

## Common asthma symptoms

Moving from bad to worse, common symptoms of an asthma flare up include the following:

- **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.



## What do I need to do next?

- 1 Learn about common asthma symptoms (below) and what typically triggers them (on **pages 2 through 3**).
- 2 Use the space provided on **page 4** to record what you've learned about how asthma affects you.
- 3 Talk to your doctor about how your personal asthma triggers and symptoms fit with your Asthma Action Plan.

- **Difficulty breathing, chest tightness.** As breathing becomes difficult, you may feel chest pain or tightness.
- **Shallow breathing.** It may get harder 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 TRIGGERS	How you can AVOID or eliminate these triggers
<p><b>RESPIRATORY INFECTIONS</b>—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.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get plenty of rest, eat healthily, and exercise regularly.</li> <li>• Avoid people who are sick, and wash your hands often.</li> <li>• Get a flu shot every year in the fall.</li> </ul>
<p><b>EXERCISE</b>—This 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. Your doctor may recommend the strategies at right.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take medicine 5 to 10 minutes before you begin exercise.</li> <li>• Warm up for 10 minutes before exercise.</li> <li>• Get some aerobic exercise every day. Aerobic exercise is anything that gets your heart pumping a little faster.</li> </ul>
<p><b>WEATHER</b>—A sudden blast of cold air, high heat and humidity, and dry climates can all trigger asthma symptoms.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In the cold: Dress for the weather. 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.</li> <li>• In heat and humidity: Use air conditioning in your home and in your car. Drink 6 to 10 glasses of water daily.</li> </ul>
<p><b>EMOTIONAL STRESS</b>—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.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Try to stay calm and relaxed.</li> <li>• Take deep breaths.</li> <li>• Slow your breathing by counting while you breathe in and out.</li> <li>• Do any activity that distracts and relaxes you.</li> </ul>
<p><b>SLEEP</b>—If you have asthma symptoms that occur at night (called nocturnal asthma), then your asthma is not controlled. This can be brought on by allergens in the bedroom, a drop in body temperature, and heartburn (GERD, gastroesophageal reflux disease).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep your bedroom clear of allergens and follow your Asthma Action Plan.</li> <li>• Treat your GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disease) if you have it.</li> <li>• Contact your doctor for an adjustment to your treatment plan.</li> </ul>
<p><b>MEDICINES</b>—Some medicines, such as beta blockers or those that contain aspirin, may cause symptoms.</p>	<p>Talk with your doctor or pharmacist before you take medicines other than the ones that have been prescribed for your asthma.</p>
<p><b>IRRITANTS IN THE AIR</b>—Tobacco smoke is among the worst airborne irritants. Other problem-causing irritants come from 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 problems.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't allow smoking in your home or car. If you smoke, quit.</li> <li>• Watch the news for pollution alerts (high-ozone days), and be ready to step up your treatment if necessary.</li> <li>• Replace your swamp cooler with central air conditioning.</li> <li>• Don't use wood burning stoves, fireplaces, or kerosene heaters at home.</li> <li>• Avoid perfumes and perfumed products, such as candles and hair spray.</li> <li>• Consider a HEPA filter to clean the air in your home.</li> </ul>

Allergens [AL-er-jens] 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.

Common asthma TRIGGERS: ALLERGENS	How you can AVOID or eliminate these triggers
<p><b>ANIMAL DANDER</b>—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.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If possible, remove the animal from your home. Avoid visits to homes of families or friends with pets.</li> <li>• At a minimum, keep pets off of the bed and out of the bedroom.</li> <li>• Block heating vents, or place filters over them.</li> <li>• When possible, get rid of cloth-covered furniture.</li> <li>• Replace carpets with solid surface flooring.</li> <li>• Consider a HEPA filter to clean the air in your home.</li> </ul>
<p><b>POLLENS</b>—Powder-like substances produced by blooming plants, these may be a trigger if your asthma worsens at particular times of the year, such as when you have "hay fever" or sneezing and an itchy nose or eyes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep windows in your house and car closed.</li> <li>• Use central air conditioning or a room air conditioner to stay cool indoors.</li> <li>• During allergy seasons, limit outdoor activities on windy days and when pollen counts are high.</li> <li>• Keep lawns short to minimize flowering and your yard free of weeds.</li> </ul>
<p><b>MOLDS</b>—Molds that may cause asthma symptoms grow in warm, damp, and poorly lit places, like a bathroom, closet, basement, and even behind wallpaper.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Replace your swamp cooler with central air conditioning.</li> <li>• Install exhaust fans to increase ventilation in damp areas.</li> <li>• Regularly clean mold-prone areas with a cleaner that has bleach in it.</li> <li>• Limit the number of house plants you keep in your home.</li> <li>• Shake excess water off of shower curtains.</li> <li>• Replace any areas in your home that have persistent mold growth from water damage.</li> </ul>
<p><b>PESTS</b>—Dust mites and cockroaches cause problems but are uncommon in the West.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wash linens and stuffed toys once a week in HOT water to kill dust mites.</li> <li>• Keep food covered, counter tops clean, and remove garbage daily.</li> <li>• Set bait traps or use professional pest control services. Spray insecticides, but only when the person with asthma is out of the house.</li> <li>• Put airtight covers on mattresses, box springs, pillows, and comforters.</li> <li>• Replace carpet with flooring and upholstered furniture with leather or vinyl.</li> </ul>
<p><b>FOOD PRODUCTS</b>—Certain foods and food additives that can trigger allergic reactions and asthma symptoms. Common culprits include eggs, milk, wheat, soy, fish, corn, seafood, nuts, and peanuts. Others include sulfites, an additive found in processed foods and drinks.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read ingredient labels carefully, and avoid problem foods that can cause symptoms.</li> <li>• Ask questions at restaurants.</li> <li>• Ask your healthcare providers what to do in case you are accidentally exposed to food allergens. (You may need to carry special medicine in case of an exposure.)</li> </ul>

## Knowing how symptoms vary

Asthma symptoms are different for each person and may be different each time you experience them.

Here are some things to consider:

- **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 your 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 any 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
- Having 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 keep from having more serious symptoms.

## My symptoms and triggers

Use the space below to write down the symptoms and triggers you experience most often.

### My symptoms

- Type: \_\_\_\_\_
- Time: \_\_\_\_\_
- Duration: \_\_\_\_\_
- Severity: \_\_\_\_\_

### My triggers

(Check all that apply. Then, add notes about steps you will take to avoid those triggers.)

- 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): \_\_\_\_\_
- Medicines (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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