



# Patient education: Asthma in adults (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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## What is asthma?

This is a condition that can make it hard to breathe. Asthma symptoms can be mild or severe. They can come and go. An asthma "attack" is when symptoms start suddenly. This happens when the airways in the lungs become more narrow and inflamed ( [figure 1](#)).

Asthma can run in families.

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## What are the symptoms of asthma?

Asthma symptoms can include:

- Wheezing or noisy breathing
- Coughing
- Tight feeling in the chest
- Shortness of breath

Symptoms can happen each day, each week, or less often. Symptoms can range from mild to severe. Although it is rare, an asthma attack can sometimes even lead to death.

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## Is there a test for asthma?

Yes. Your doctor will ask you about your symptoms and have you do a breathing test to check how your lungs are working.

If your doctor thinks allergies might be making your asthma worse, they might suggest allergy testing. This can include skin tests or blood tests.

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## How is asthma treated?

Asthma is treated with different types of medicines. The medicines can come as inhalers, liquids, pills, or shots. Your doctor will prescribe medicine based on how often you have symptoms and how serious they are. There are 2 main types of asthma medicines:

- **Quick-relief medicines** stop symptoms quickly, in 5 to 15 minutes. Almost everyone with asthma carries a quick-relief inhaler with them. People use these medicines whenever they have asthma symptoms. Most people need them 1 or 2 times a week, or less often. But when asthma symptoms get worse, more doses might be needed.
- **Long-term controller medicines** control asthma and help prevent future attacks. People who get asthma symptoms more than 2 times a week should use a controller medicine every day.

Some medicines can work as both a controller medicine **and** a quick-relief medicine. These are taken once or twice a day as controller medicines. They can also be used for quick relief.

It is very important to take all the medicines your doctor prescribes, exactly how you are supposed to take them. You might take medicines a few times a day. Your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist will show you the right way to use your inhaler(s).

If your symptoms get much worse all of a sudden, use your quick-relief medicine and contact your doctor or nurse. You might need to go to the hospital for treatment.

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## What is an asthma action plan?

This is a list of instructions that tell you ( [form 1](#)):

- Which medicines to use each day at home
- Which medicines to take if your symptoms get worse
- When to get help or call for an ambulance

If you have frequent or severe asthma symptoms, your doctor might suggest you have an asthma action plan. If so, you and your doctor will work together to make one. As part of your action plan, you might need to use something called a "peak flow meter." Breathing into this device shows how your lungs are working. Your doctor will show you the right way to use it.

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## How can I prevent asthma symptoms?

There are things you can do to help prevent asthma attacks. Your doctor or nurse can talk to you about what is most important for you.

In general, you can:

- **Avoid "triggers"** – These are things that make your symptoms worse. Common triggers include smoke, air pollution, dust, mold, pollen, strong chemicals or smells, and very cold or dry air. For some people, being around certain animals can trigger symptoms. Exercise and stress can also be triggers.

Some adults with asthma have worse symptoms if they take [aspirin](#) or medicines called NSAIDs. NSAIDs include [ibuprofen](#) (sample brand names: Advil, Motrin) and [naproxen](#) (sample brand names: Aleve, Naprosyn). Ask your doctor if you need to avoid these.

If you can't avoid certain triggers, talk with your doctor about what you can do. For example, you might need to take an extra dose of your quick-relief inhaler medicine before you exercise or are around things you are allergic to.

- **Lower your risk of getting sick** – Some infections can make asthma symptoms worse. These include the common cold, the flu, and COVID-19.

It's important to get the COVID-19 vaccine. This lowers the risk of severe illness if you do get COVID-19. You should also get a flu shot every year. Plus, some people need to get a vaccine to help prevent pneumonia.

If you think you might have an infection, tell your doctor or nurse. They can help you figure out if you need treatment.

- **Make sure you know how and when to take your medicines** – If you take controller medicines, follow all instructions to help prevent symptoms. You should also make sure you know how and when to use your quick-relief medicine.
- **See your doctor or nurse regularly** – If you need asthma medicine every day, see your doctor or nurse at least every 6 months. At these appointments, they will ask about your symptoms, check how well your lungs are working, and talk about your treatment plan. People with severe asthma and frequent asthma attacks should see a doctor who specializes in asthma.

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## What if I want to get pregnant?

Talk to your doctor about how to control your asthma. Keeping your asthma well controlled is important for the health of your baby. Most asthma medicines are safe to take during pregnancy.

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## When should I call the doctor?

**Call for an ambulance** (in the US and Canada, **call 9-1-1**) if you have severe symptoms like:

- You have so much trouble breathing you cannot talk.
- Your lips or fingernails turn gray or blue.

Call your doctor or nurse if you:

- Have an asthma attack and the symptoms do not improve, or get worse, after using a quick-relief medicine
- Need to use your quick-relief medicine more than a few times a week
- Cannot do your normal activities because of your asthma symptoms
- Have any questions about your medicines

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## More on this topic

[Patient education: Asthma in adults – Discharge instructions \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Asthma action plan for adults \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Avoiding asthma triggers \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Exercise-induced asthma \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Asthma and pregnancy \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Medicines for asthma \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Inhaled corticosteroid medicines \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: How to use your soft mist inhaler \(adults\) \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: How to use your dry powder inhaler \(adults\) \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: How to use your metered dose inhaler \(adults\) \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: How to use a nebulizer \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: How to use a peak flow meter \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: How to use a pulse oximeter \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Breathing exercises \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Breathing tests \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Spirometry \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Wheezing \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Cough in adults \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Trigger avoidance in asthma \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Exercise-induced asthma \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Asthma and pregnancy \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Asthma treatment in adolescents and adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Inhaler techniques in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

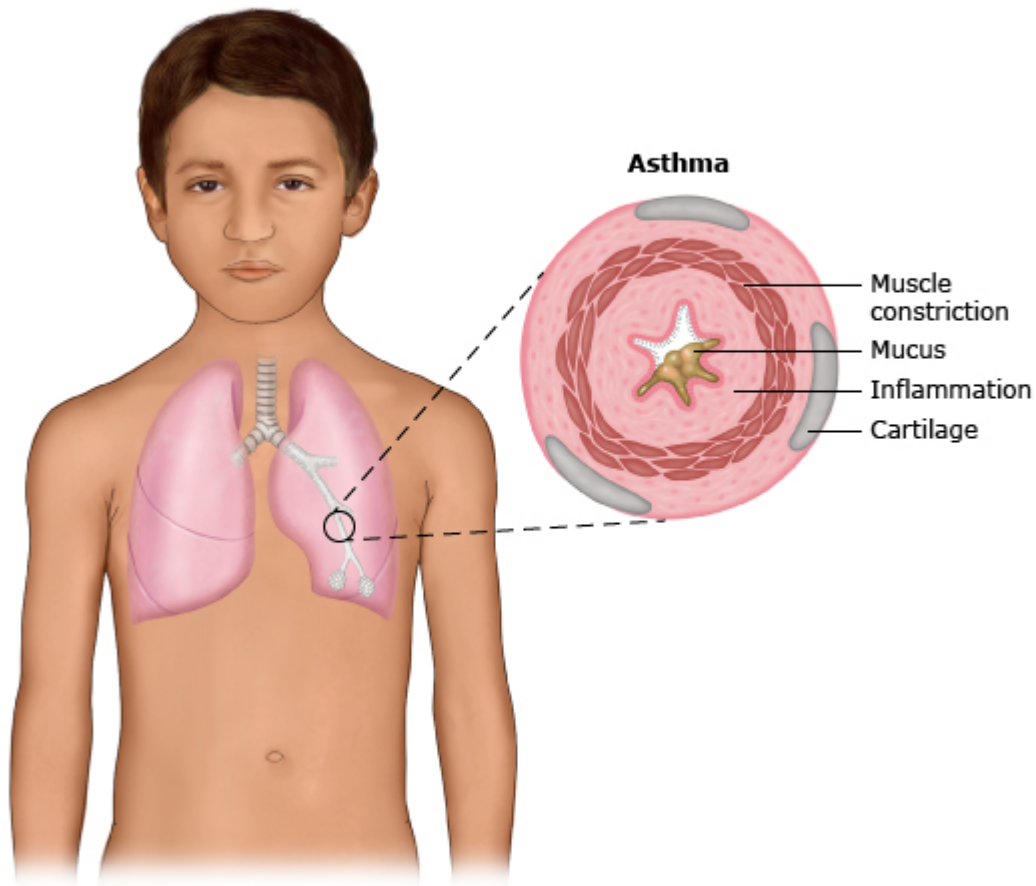
[Patient education: How to use a peak flow meter \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

All topics are updated as new evidence becomes available and our [peer review process](#) is complete.

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Topic 15343 Version 31.0

**GRAPHICS****Asthma**

During an asthma attack or flare-up, the muscles around the airways tighten (constrict), and the lining of the airways gets inflamed. Then, mucus builds up. All of this makes it hard to breathe.

Graphic 65956 Version 11.0

# Asthma action plan (adult)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Daily asthma (controller) medicines:**

Name of medicine	How much to take	When to take


**Quick-relief (rescue) medicines:**

Name of medicine	How much to take	When to take

Doctor's name: \_\_\_\_\_ Doctor's phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

Emergency contact name: \_\_\_\_\_ Emergency contact phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

**GREEN ZONE: Feeling good**



**Symptoms:**


- Breathing is normal
- No asthma symptoms, even with activity
- Can work and exercise
- Sleeping well

**Peak flow meter reading:** Above \_\_\_\_\_

**What to do:**

- Keep taking daily controller medications
- Avoid things that trigger symptoms

**YELLOW ZONE: Use caution**



**Symptoms:**

- Asthma symptoms getting worse
- Coughing, wheezing, chest tightness
- Less active than usual
- Trouble sleeping

**Peak flow meter reading:** Between \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_

**What to do:**

- **Take quick-relief (rescue) medicine**
- Keep taking daily controller medications
- Avoid things that trigger symptoms
- Other instructions:

**RED ZONE: Get help quickly**



**Symptoms:**

- Asthma symptoms very bad
- Cough, wheezing, or trouble breathing not better after taking quick-relief medicine
- Cannot do usual activities

**Peak flow meter reading:** Below \_\_\_\_\_

**What to do:**

- **Take quick-relief (rescue) medicine, and call your doctor or nurse**
- **Call for emergency help if (in the US and Canada, call 9-1-1):**
  - You have so much trouble breathing that you cannot talk
  - Your lips or fingernails turn gray or blue
  - You can't reach your doctor or nurse
- Give additional medicine: \_\_\_\_\_
- Other instructions:

Graphic 140838 Version 1.0

