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The National Women's Health Information Center

A project of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health



Frequently Asked Questions about Asthma

What is asthma?

Asthma is a chronic disease of the lungs. You can have a mild or serious form of asthma. If you have asthma, you may have a bad cough, wheezing, a tight feeling in the chest, and trouble breathing. Asthma cannot be cured, but it can usually be controlled.

In an asthma attack, the airways (or *bronchial tubes*) in your lungs react to some stimulus or trigger. The airways become inflamed and swollen and make more mucus than usual. Muscles around the airways in your lungs tighten or constrict. The constriction and swelling make it hard to breathe and cause the other symptoms of asthma.

Each year, nearly 500,000 Americans are hospitalized and more than 5,000 die from asthma. Children are more likely to develop asthma than adults, especially inner-city children. African Americans are hospitalized for asthma and are more likely to die from asthma than other Americans.

Are women affected by asthma differently than men?

Yes. Although boys are more likely than girls to have asthma, adult women are more likely than men to have asthma. Women are more likely than men to be hospitalized or to die from asthma. Research shows that asthma may be linked to women's hormonal changes. For example, asthma attacks may take place just before or during a woman's period.

A side effect of steroid medicines used for asthma is loss of bone density, which can lead to *osteoporosis*. Talk to your health care provider about ways to keep bones strong.

What causes asthma?

The cause of asthma is not yet understood. Both genetic and environmental factors appear to play roles in asthma. Many people with asthma have allergic reactions to particles breathed in through the air, such as animal dander and pollen. These common substances are called *allergens*, meaning that they cause an allergic reaction. The tendency to react to allergens by having an asthma attack is probably genetic.

There is no cure for asthma, although it can be controlled by learning to avoid asthma triggers and by taking medicine.

What can trigger an asthma attack?

People with asthma have airways that are very sensitive to certain allergens or other stimuli. The triggers vary from one person to another. Some common causes of asthma attacks include:

- Animal dander (from the skin, hair, or feathers of animals)

- Waste products from dust mites
- Pollen from trees and grass
- Mold (indoor and outdoor)
- Cigarette smoke
- Air pollution
- Infections such as colds and the flu
- Exercise
- Strong feelings or stress
- Changes in weather, cold air
- Strong odors from painting or cooking
- Scented products
- Certain medicines and foods.

This is not a complete list of all the things that trigger asthma. People may have trouble with one or more of these triggers. Everyone is different.

How can I find out if I have asthma?

If you are coughing, wheezing, having trouble breathing, or your chest feels tight, see your doctor or health care provider. There are tests to find out if you have asthma.

How is asthma treated?

Asthma treatment includes avoiding asthma triggers and using asthma medicines. If you react strongly to certain triggers, do everything you can to avoid them. This can reduce your need for medicine to control your asthma. Anti-allergy medicine and allergy desensitization shots are sometimes useful for people with allergies.

Two kinds of medicines are often used for asthma—those used to relieve acute symptoms and those used on a long-term basis to control asthma.

- Fast-acting, inhaled *bronchodilators* are used to help open up airways to allow air to move more freely.
- Anti-inflammatory medicines, such as *corticosteroids* (steroids), are used every day on a long-term basis to help reduce the swelling of airways. These may be sprays (inhalers) or pills.

If you have mild asthma, you may use only a bronchodilator as needed to relieve your symptoms. If you have more severe asthma, you may need both kinds of medicines. It is important to use your medicines exactly as your doctor tells you.

Many people with moderate or severe asthma use a device called a *peak flow meter* at home to measure lung function. The peak flow meter can help warn of a possible asthma attack even before you notice symptoms. You can then stop the attack by taking your medicine right away. The meter can also tell you how well you are responding to medicine.

If you have asthma, talk to your doctor about a treatment plan. Your plan may include:

- regular checkups
- ways to avoid asthma triggers
- medicines and how to use them properly
- how and when to use a peak flow meter
- what to do in an emergency if your asthma gets very bad.

What can I do to prevent an asthma attack?

Here are some ways you can help prevent an asthma attack. Remember, everyone is different. Some people have trouble with pollen, others have trouble with tobacco smoke, and others may have trouble with animal dander. Follow the steps that make sense for you.

- Wash your pet once a week.
- Do not smoke.
- Do not allow smoking in your home.
- Stay indoors with the air conditioner on when the pollen count is high.
- Wash your bedding, clothes, and stuffed toys once a week in hot water.
- Wash your hands often.
- Get a flu shot.
- Wear a scarf over your mouth and nose in the winter.
- Be aware of what makes you have asthma attacks and try to stay away from those triggers.
- Follow your asthma treatment plan.

How does asthma affect a pregnant woman? Can I take my asthma medicine?

Asthma may get better, get worse, or stay the same during pregnancy. Most women with asthma have safe and normal pregnancies. But it is important for you to follow your treatment plan and control your asthma when you are pregnant. Uncontrolled asthma seems to be more harmful than taking asthma medicines.

Many asthma medicines are safe for use during pregnancy. Inhaled medicines are generally preferred because they are less likely to be passed on to the baby than oral medicines. However, oral medicines may be needed to control the symptoms. Talk with your doctor to make sure that your medicines are safe to take during pregnancy. Taking your asthma medicine helps make sure that your baby gets enough oxygen.

For more information...

For more information, call the National Women's Health Information Center at (800) 994-9662 or contact the following organizations.

National Asthma Education and Prevention Program

Phone Number(s): (301) 592-8573

Internet Address: <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/about/naepp>

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

Phone Number (s); (800) 448-0440

Internet Address: <http://www.niaid.nih.gov>

American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology

Phone Number (s): (800) 822-2762

Internet Address: www.aaaai.org

American College of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology

Phone Number (s): (847) 427-1200

Internet Address: <http://allergy.mcg.edu>

American Lung Association

Phone Number (s): (800) 586-4872

Internet Address: <http://www.lungusa.org/asthma>

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