



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CDC 24/7: Saving Lives. Protecting People.™

Asthma

Basic Information

What Is Asthma?

Asthma is a disease that affects your lungs. It is one of the most common long-term diseases of children, but adults have asthma, too. Asthma causes repeated episodes of wheezing, breathlessness, chest tightness, and nighttime or early morning coughing. If you have asthma, you have it all the time, but you will have asthma attacks only when something bothers your lungs.

In most cases, we don't know what causes asthma, and we don't know how to cure it. We know that if someone in your family has asthma, you are also more likely to have it.

You can control your asthma by knowing the warning signs of an attack, staying away from things that trigger an attack, and following the advice of your doctor or other medical professional. When you control your asthma:

- you won't have symptoms such as wheezing or coughing,
- you'll sleep better,
- you won't miss work or school,
- you can take part in all physical activities, and
- you won't have to go to the hospital.



How Is Asthma Diagnosed?

Asthma can be hard to diagnose, especially in children younger than 5 years of age. Regular physical checkups that include checking your lung function and checking for allergies can help your doctor or other medical professional make the right diagnosis.

During a checkup, the doctor or other medical professional will ask you questions about whether you cough a lot, especially at night, and whether your breathing problems are worse after physical activity or during a particular time of year. Doctors will also ask about other symptoms, such as chest tightness, wheezing, and colds that last more than 10 days. They will ask you whether your family members have or have had asthma, allergies, or other breathing problems, and they will ask you questions about your home. The doctor will also ask you about missing school or work and about any trouble you may have doing certain activities.

A lung function test, called *spirometry* (spy-rom-e-tree), is another way to diagnose asthma. A spirometer (spy-rom-e-ter) measures the largest amount of air you can exhale, or breathe out, after taking a very deep breath. The spirometer can measure airflow before and after you use asthma medicine.

What Is an Asthma Attack?

An asthma attack happens in your body's airways, which are the paths that carry air to your lungs. As the air moves through your lungs, the airways become smaller, like the branches of a tree are smaller than the tree trunk. During an asthma attack, the sides of the airways in your lungs swell and the airways shrink. Less air gets in and out of your lungs, and mucus that your body produces clogs up the airways even more. The attack may include coughing, chest tightness, wheezing, and trouble breathing. Some people call an asthma attack an *episode*.

What Causes an Asthma Attack?

An asthma attack can occur when you are exposed to things in the environment, such as house dust mites and tobacco smoke. These are called *asthma triggers*. Some of the most important triggers are available at [Important Asthma Triggers \(triggers.html\)](#).

The above text is from the "[You Can Control Your Asthma](http://www.cdc.gov/asthma/pdfs/asthma_brochure.pdf)" (http://www.cdc.gov/asthma/pdfs/asthma_brochure.pdf) [PDF, 4 MB] full-color brochure and is suitable for downloading and printing.

- Page last reviewed: April 24, 2009
- Page last updated: March 12, 2012
- Content source: [National Center for Environmental Health \(http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/\)](http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/)



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - 1600 Clifton Rd. Atlanta, GA 30333, USA
800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636) TTY: (888) 232-6348 - cdcinfo@cdc.gov