

Asthma Basics



What is asthma?

Asthma is a disease that affects your lungs. Asthma causes wheezing, breathlessness, chest tightness, and coughing at night or early in the morning. When exposed to your asthma triggers, the sides of your airways swell and the muscles tighten, leaving less room for the air to move freely.

Do I have asthma?

Having a doctor check how well your lungs work and check for allergies can help you find out if you have asthma. The doctor may also do a breathing test, called spirometry, to find out how well your lungs are working by testing how much air you can breathe out after taking a very deep breath before and after you use asthma medicine.

Example of airway constriction.
People with asthma describe it as breathing through a straw.

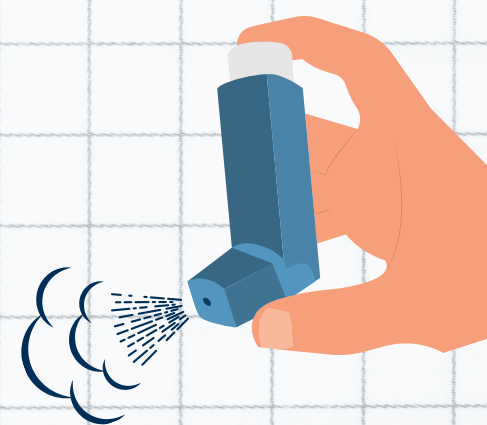


Can asthma be cured?

Asthma doesn't go away and it can't be cured. Once you develop asthma, you're likely to have it for a lifetime. Even when you have no symptoms—even when you're feeling just fine—the asthma is still there and can flare up at any time.

What is an asthma attack?

An asthma attack may include coughing, chest tightness, wheezing, and trouble breathing. The 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 mucous that your body makes clogs up the airways.



How is asthma treated?

Everyone with asthma does not take the same medicine. Asthma medicines come in two types—quick-relief and long-term control. Long-term control medicines help you have fewer and milder attacks, but they don't help you while you are having an asthma attack. You can control your asthma. With your doctor's help, make your own asthma action plan. Decide who should have a copy of your plan and where he or she should keep it. Take your long-term control medicine even when you don't have symptoms.