

What is Asthma?

Triggers and treatment for the most common chronic childhood disease



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Asthma is a disease that affects the lungs. It occurs when airways become narrow because their linings are swollen, irritated and inflamed. This leads to the muscles lining the airways to have spasms (called “bronchospasms”) which block the airways even more. The level of airway inflammation varies between individuals and varies over time, and can be present without any symptoms. The spasms usually lead to coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath, and chest tightness. It’s often called an “asthma attack.”

What triggers asthma?

There are many things that you inhale that can cause asthma, but the most common in children are:

- pollen
- mold
- pets
- smoke*
- respiratory illnesses (colds)
- exercise
- changes in temperature

* see list of community resources to stop smoking



How is asthma diagnosed?

Doctors diagnose asthma based on the symptoms of coughing or wheezing following the triggers that cause them. In older children, lung tests called spirometry can also be used to diagnose asthma. Asthma is also classified into different groups depending on the frequency of symptoms.

Early Warning Signs

- Runny nose
- Cough/congestion
- Headache
- Chest pain
- Shortness of breath
- Feeling tired
- Decreased activity
- Wheezing

How is asthma treated?

Acute, or a rapid onset of asthma symptoms such as cough, wheezing, shortness of breath and chest tightness are treated with rescue medicines. These medicines relax airway muscles to relieve the bronchospasm. Commonly used rescue medicines are listed below. The most important part of asthma treatment is controlling the inflammation of the airways. This can be done by avoiding triggers and using controller medicines. These medicines are used every day to control symptoms on a long-term basis and prevent asthma flare-ups.

Rescue medicines

- Albuterol (Ventolin, Proventil, ProAir)
- Levalbuterol (Xopenex)

Controller medicines

- Inhaled corticosteroids (Flovent, Pulmicort, QVAR)
- Leukotriene modifiers (Singulair)



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