

# WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ASTHMA

In the Clinic  
Annals of Internal Medicine

## What is asthma?

- A long-term disease that affects the lungs and causes wheezing, chest tightness, difficulty breathing, and coughing.
- When an asthma attack occurs, tubes (bronchi) that bring air to the lungs tighten, and breathing becomes difficult.
- An asthma attack can occur when something irritates your lungs, such as smoke, mold, or dust mites.

## How is it diagnosed?

- Your doctor will ask you questions about your symptoms and whether anyone in your family has had asthma or other breathing problems.
- A simple breathing test called spirometry may be performed to check how well your lungs are functioning.
- Spirometry measures how much air you can breathe out after taking a very deep breath.

## How is it treated?

- Long-term medicines that you take every day can help prevent asthma attacks, but don't help you during an attack.
- Quick-relief medicines can reduce your symptoms when attacks occur.
- If you need to use your quick-relief medicines more and more, your doctor may need to prescribe a different medicine.
- A personalized asthma action plan helps guide you on when to take medications and how to adjust them to keep your asthma under control.
- Call your doctor or go to the hospital if it is hard to breathe and your medicines are not helping.

## How can you prevent an asthma attack?

- Stay away from what makes your asthma worse, such as dust, smoke, animals, and cold or dry air.
- Don't smoke, and stay away from people who do.
- Asthma-proof your home—for example, discard old carpets and drapes, and use a special mattress and pillow covers.
- Use air conditioners and dehumidifiers.
- Take your medicines that prevent attacks every day, even when you don't have symptoms.
- Take your medicines that stop attacks when you need them.
- Learn the right way to use your inhalers.



## For More Information

[www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/lung/asthma/have\\_asthma.htm](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/lung/asthma/have_asthma.htm)  
[www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/lung/asthma/asthma\\_atglance.pdf](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/lung/asthma/asthma_atglance.pdf)  
A handout titled, "So You Have Asthma: A Guide for Patients and Their Families" and asthma facts from the NHLBI.

[www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/lung/asthma/actionplan\\_text.htm](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/lung/asthma/actionplan_text.htm)  
An asthma action plan worksheet from the NHLBI.

[www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/presentations/100200\\_1.htm](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/presentations/100200_1.htm)  
A tutorial on proper use of a metered-dose inhaler.

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