

Asthma

3. Non-environmental triggers - These are additional things that can induce asthma attacks. Examples can include the following:

- Emotional stress - Emotions such as anxiety, fear and excitement can trigger asthma. Relaxation techniques, like deep breathing, are helpful to control such attacks.
- Colds and chest infections - These often lead to worse asthma symptoms, especially in children. Discuss these situations with your doctor and create a plan for handling these attacks.
- Exercise - Some people experience exercise induced asthma. Temperature, humidity and how long you exercise are contributing factors to these attacks. It is important to realize that the benefits of regular exercise usually outweigh the risks. Exercise improves the efficiency of your heart and lungs, and increases your ability to relax. The key to exercising with asthma is controlling your asthma.

How do asthma medications work?

There are two types of medications used to treat asthma. Each type treats a separate part of the condition. **Most people with asthma require both.**

Controllers - Also called preventers, controllers are used to treat the underlying inflammation of the airways. They do not provide quick relief of symptoms in an asthma attack. They are taken every day whether you have symptoms or not and constantly work to prevent attacks.

Relievers - These medications are used only when necessary. They provide temporary relief for the symptoms of asthma during an attack but do not reduce the inflammation in the airways. Knowing the difference between the two types of medications and understanding why both are used is important. If your controller medication is successful and you recognize and avoid your asthma triggers, over time your reliever medication will be required less and less.

How is asthma controlled?

Most people with asthma live full and active lives, many symptom-free. To do this you must learn how to control your asthma. Controlling asthma is accomplished by:

Avoiding asthma triggers - Get to know your asthma triggers. Avoiding them will reduce your attacks.

Taking medication - Take both your controller and reliever medications as prescribed by your doctor.

Education - Know your condition. Understand the use of peak-flow meters, spacer devices and other tools available to help control asthma.

Using an asthma action plan - Developed by you and your doctor, this plan will help you to manage your asthma and react to changing symptoms. Once you commit to controlling your asthma, you are ready to regain control of your life. This commitment is the key to your future.



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What is asthma?

Asthma is a chronic lung condition that causes a person's airways to become inflamed and extra sensitive. During an attack, the airways narrow, obstructing the flow of air and making it difficult to breathe. Airways narrow due to the occurrence of one or all of the following:

- The lining of the airways become swollen.
- The inflamed lung tissues produce more mucus which builds up in the airways.
- The muscles that surround the airways tighten causing the airways to narrow.

Who is most likely to get asthma?

Although it is often first diagnosed in children, asthma can affect anyone and develop at any age. It is estimated that about three million Canadians suffer from asthma. What causes asthma is unknown, however researchers have concluded that both hereditary and environmental factors can lead to asthma.

Heredity - If a parent has asthma, you may inherit a tendency to develop asthma. If both parents have asthma, it is highly likely that you will too.

Environment - You may develop asthma if you are exposed to one or more personal triggers. Triggers can be anything inside or outside, at home or at work. Occasionally, people who have jobs that expose them to triggers in the workplace develop what is known as occupational asthma.

What are the symptoms of asthma?

Symptoms vary from person to person and from episode to episode. They can be either mild or severe and can include the following:

- Chronic coughing
- Tightness or heaviness in chest
- Shortness of breath
- Wheezing sound when you breathe.

If you think you may have asthma, visit your doctor. He will evaluate your symptoms along with your medical history and perform lung-function tests before making a diagnosis.

What are asthma triggers?

A trigger is anything or any condition that can cause an asthma attack. It is important for asthma sufferers to recognize their personal triggers in order to avoid them. Triggers are divided into three different categories.

1. Allergens - This group consists of things that a person is allergic to. They cause the body to react-irritating airways or tightening the surrounding muscles. Allergens can include the following:

- **Animals** - Pets such as cats, dogs, gerbils, hamsters, rabbits, mice, guinea pigs and even birds can make asthma worse. It is recommended that families with an asthma sufferer remove pets from the home.
- **Pollen** - Asthma sufferers who are allergic to pollen should stay inside during periods of high pollen counts. Using air conditioners in your home and car and keeping the windows closed during peak periods is very helpful.
- **Mold** - Molds are found in damp areas such as basements, garbage containers and shower stalls. Frequent cleaning, low household humidity and increased airflow to damp areas will reduce the growth of molds.
- **Dust mites** - Dust mites accumulate in places such as carpets, pillows, bedding, mattresses and stuffed animals. Vacuum floors and furniture frequently. If symptoms are severe, consider removing the carpets. Bedding should be washed weekly in hot water, and mattresses can be enclosed in impermeable casings. Low humidity is also effective, as dust mites can't survive in dry environments.
- **Foods and food additives** - Certain foods can cause reactions and trigger asthma attacks. Be aware of what you are eating, especially in restaurants and

where someone else is preparing the food. Food additives such as colouring, preservatives and MSG have also been known to cause asthma attacks in some people.

- **Certain medications** - Some medications can induce asthma attacks. Make sure you inform health care professionals who may be prescribing medication for you that you have asthma.



Many people with asthma also have allergies; but everyone with allergies does not develop asthma, and everyone with asthma does not develop allergies.

2. Irritants - Consist of things that can bother just about anyone but can bring on an attack for asthma sufferers. Irritants can include the following:

- **Smoke** - Smoke, firsthand or secondhand, is responsible for many asthma attacks. If you have asthma and you smoke, you should quit. To avoid second-hand smoke, don't allow smoking in your home or car, and stay away from smoky public places.
- **Strong fumes** - Fumes from chemicals or perfumes either in the home or on the job can irritate the lungs and trigger an asthma attack. It is important to avoid such fumes in order to control your asthma.
- **Air pollution** - On days where the air quality is poor, asthma sufferers should try to stay indoors as much as possible. Using air conditioners and keeping windows closed can also help.
- **Cold air** - Cold air can trigger an asthma attack. If you must go outside, try breathing through your nose to warm the air before it reaches your lungs. Breathing through a scarf can help moisten the air also making it easier on your lungs.