

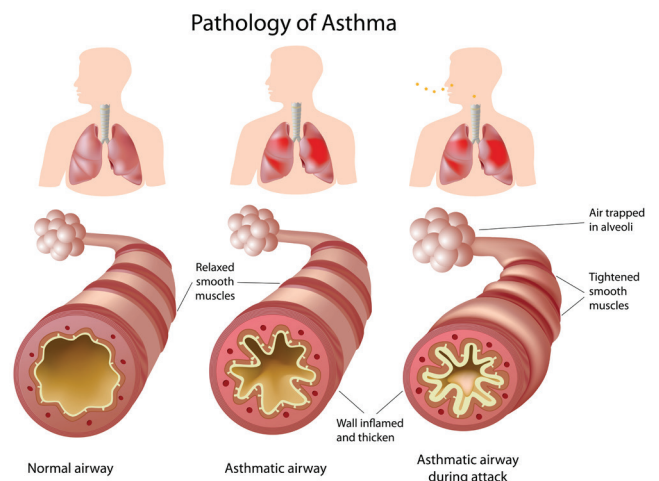
Understanding Your Asthma



WHAT IS ASTHMA

Asthma is a lung disease that inflames and narrows the airways. It causes wheezing (a whistling sound when you breathe), chest tightness, shortness of breath, and coughing. That's because when the airways narrow it causes less air to flow into the lungs. The swelling also can worsen, making the airways even more narrow. Cells in the airways might make more mucus than usual. Mucus is a sticky, thick liquid that can further narrow the airways.

This chain reaction can result in asthma symptoms. Symptoms can happen each time the airways are inflamed.



WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF ASTHMA

Common signs and symptoms of asthma include

- **Coughing.** Coughing from asthma often is worse at night or early in the morning, making it hard to sleep
- **Wheezing.** Wheezing is a whistling or squeaky sound that occurs when you breathe
- **Chest tightness.** This may feel like something is squeezing or sitting on your chest
- **Shortness of breath.** Some people who have asthma say they can't catch their breath or they feel out of breath. You may feel like you can't get air out of your lungs

Not all people who have asthma have these symptoms. Likewise, having these symptoms doesn't always mean that you have asthma. The best way to know for certain is to have a lung function test, a physical exam, and to discuss your medical history (including type and frequency of symptoms) with your doctor.

The types of asthma symptoms you have, how often they occur, and how severe they are may vary over time. Sometimes your symptoms may be mild. Other times, they may be troublesome enough to limit your daily routine.

WHAT CAUSES ASTHMA SYMPTOMS TO OCCUR

Many things can worsen asthma symptoms. Some people call this an asthma attack or an asthma episode. Your doctor will help you find out which things (sometimes called triggers) may cause your asthma to flare up if you come in contact with them.

Some of the most common things that bring on asthma symptoms are airborne allergens and irritants, viral infections, and exercise.

Airborne allergens are substances that you breathe in and that can cause you to have an allergic reaction. That is, in some people, the immune system sees them as foreign or threatening and reacts in an overly strong way to protect the body against them. Some of the most common allergens are dust, animal fur, cockroaches, mold, and pollens from trees, grasses, and flowers.

Irritants are things in the environment that may irritate your lungs. Some of the most common irritants are cigarette smoke, air pollution, chemicals or dust in the workplace, compounds in home decor products, and strong odors or sprays (such as hairspray, perfumes, and paint).

Other triggers include

- Medicines (such as aspirin or other nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs and nonselective beta-blockers)
- Sulfites and preservatives in foods (such as dried fruit or instant potatoes) and drinks (such as wine or beer)
- Viral upper respiratory infections (such as colds)
- Physical activity, including exercise



Asthma is different for each person. Some of the triggers listed above may not affect you. Other triggers that do affect you may not be on the list. Talk with your doctor about the things that seem to make your asthma worse.