Understanding and Managing Your Asthma
LIVING WITH ASTHMA

You may have been told that you have asthma. It is a common, chronic (long-term) lung disease. You may not know much about asthma, but you are not alone. Approximately 25.5 million Americans are estimated to have asthma. You have taken the important first step by seeing your doctor to help you treat your disease. Take good care of yourself. Learn more about asthma and how to manage it with this booklet.
ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

This booklet will help you learn about asthma.

The topics in this booklet include
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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 CAUSES ASTHMA

The exact cause of asthma is not known. Genetic and environmental factors may interact to cause asthma, most often early in life.

These factors include

- An inherited tendency to develop allergies, called atopy (AT-o-pe)
- Parents who have asthma
- Certain respiratory infections during childhood
- Contact with some airborne allergens or exposure to some viral infections in infancy or in early childhood when the immune system is developing

If asthma or atopy runs in your family, exposure to irritants (for example, tobacco smoke) may make your airways more reactive to substances in the air.

Some factors may be more likely to cause asthma in some people than in others.
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).
WHAT CAUSES ASTHMA SYMPTOMS TO OCCUR (cont’d)

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.
TAKING CONTROL OF YOUR ASTHMA

Asthma is a long-term disease that can be controlled with appropriate treatment.

**Good asthma control will**
- Prevent chronic and troublesome symptoms, such as coughing and shortness of breath
- Reduce your need for quick-relief medicines
- Help you maintain good lung function
- Help you maintain your normal activity level and sleep through the night
- Prevent asthma attacks that could result in an emergency room visit or hospital stay

**Take an active role to control your asthma**
- Work with your doctor to treat other conditions that can interfere with managing your asthma
- Avoid things that make your asthma worse (asthma triggers). However, a trigger you should not avoid is physical activity. Physical activity is an important part of a healthy lifestyle. Talk with your doctor about medicines that can help you stay active
- Work with your doctor and other healthcare providers to create and follow an asthma action plan
An asthma action plan is a written document that you and your doctor develop to help control your asthma.

**It gives guidance on**
- Taking your medicines properly
- Avoiding asthma triggers (except physical activity)
- Tracking your level of asthma control
- Responding to worsening symptoms
- Seeking emergency care when needed
Asthma is treated with 2 types of medication—long-term control or maintenance medicine and quick-relief or rescue medicine.

- **Rescue medicines:** These are medicines that you can take to help you catch your breath when your usual symptoms suddenly get worse
  - Can quickly help you breathe easier
  - Work fast and last about 4 to 6 hours
  - Include bronchodilators (bronk-oh-die-lay-ters)

- **Maintenance medicines:** You can take maintenance medicines every day to help you keep symptoms under control. This type of medicine
  - Lasts 4 to 24 hours
  - May help reduce the need for your rescue medicine
  - Includes bronchodilators that you take through an inhaler
  - Includes combination medicines that you take through an inhaler

It’s important to take your maintenance medicine every day, even if you are breathing and feeling well.

Rescue medicines should be taken when breathing symptoms suddenly become worse. However, if you are using your rescue medicines every day to prevent symptoms, you need to see your doctor, who may prescribe additional maintenance medicine.
WORKING WITH YOUR DOCTOR

Your level of asthma control can vary over time and with changes in your home, school, or work. These changes can alter how often you’re exposed to the factors that can worsen your asthma. Your doctor may need to change or adjust your medicine if your asthma is not under control. On the other hand, if your asthma is well controlled for several months, your doctor may decrease your medicine. These adjustments to your medicine will help you maintain the best control possible with the least amount of medicine necessary.

Following your action plan and partnering with your doctor are important steps in keeping your asthma under control.
# Asthma Action Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
<th>Date:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emergency contact:</td>
<td>Relationship:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone number:</td>
<td>Cell phone number:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare provider:</td>
<td>Phone number:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare provider signature:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospital or emergency department phone number:</td>
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**Triggers**
- [ ] Pets
- [ ] Exercise
- [ ] Foods
- [ ] Strong odors
- [ ] Dust
- [ ] Mold
- [ ] Weather
- [ ] Air pollution
- [ ] Other

If asthma is triggered by exercise, all-school or at home take: [ ] shortness of breath or [ ] wheeze _______ puffs at least 1 __________ puffs before exercising.

**Restrictions or activity limitations:**

### Green Zone: Doing Well

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medicine</th>
<th>How Much to Take</th>
<th>When to Take It</th>
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- No coughing, wheezing, chest tightness, or difficulty breathing
- Can walk, play, exercise, perform usual activities without symptoms
- Can sleep through the night

| Peak flow ______ to ______ (80% to 100% of personal best) |

My best WIF is ________

Take these medicines every day for control and maintenance. CONTINUE your Green Zone medicines PLUS take these quick-relief medicines.

### Yellow Zone: Contributing/Worse

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- Coughing, wheezing, chest tightness, or difficulty breathing
- Symptoms with daily activities, work, play, and exercise
- Can do some but not all activities
- Sleeps with symptoms

| Peak flow ______ to ______ (60% to 80% of personal best) |

If symptoms (and peak flow, if used) return to the Green Zone after 1 hour of the quick-relief treatment, THEN ________ (to be filled by doctor)

If symptoms (and peak flow, if used) do NOT return to the Green Zone after 1 hour of the quick-relief treatment, THEN ________ (to be filled by doctor)

Call your doctor if you have been in the Yellow zone for more than 24 hours.

### Red Zone: Alert

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- Difficulty breathing, coughing, wheezing not helped with medications
- Trouble walking or talking due to severe symptoms
- Rest responsiveness to quick-relief medication
- Getting worse instead of better
- Peak flow is less than ______ (60% of personal best)

FOR EXTREME TROUBLE BREATHING/SWIFTHNESS OF BREATH GET IMMEDIATE HELP!

Follow the instructions exactly as your doctor directed. ________ (to be filled by doctor)
GETTING THE SUPPORT YOU NEED

Asthma can be managed. You can do a lot to help keep it in control. And there are a lot of ways to get information and support. Try contacting these helpful resources.

**American Lung Association**
http://www.lung.org/

**American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP)**
www.aafp.org/home.html

**American Thoracic Society**
http://www.thoracic.org

**Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America (AAFA)**
http://www.aafa.org/

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)–National Asthma Control Program (NACP)**
http://www.cdc.gov/asthma/nacp.htm

**National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute–National Asthma Education and Prevention Program (NAEPP)**
https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/about/org/naepp

**National Jewish Health**
http://www.nationaljewish.org/programs/directory/asthma/