



## ASTHMA AND ALLERGIES

More than eight million children in the U.S. have asthma. Asthma is a leading reason that children miss school or end up in the hospital. Asthma makes it hard for people to breathe. People can even die from asthma. This disease has no cure yet, but it can be controlled.

Another 40 to 50 million people have allergies. Allergies can also make it hard for people to breathe. An allergy is an unusual reaction to something, like a food or a plant, which is normally harmless. Common signs of allergies are a stuffy or runny nose, itching, or a rash.

### What happens during an asthma attack?

Asthma flare-ups are called asthma attacks. During an attack, the breathing tubes in your lungs, called bronchi and bronchioles, get smaller. During an asthma attack:

- The breathing tubes in your lungs swell up.
- The muscles around these tubes tighten.
- The tubes make large amounts of fluid called mucus.

You cannot catch asthma. It does run in families though. If someone in your family has it, you or your children may too. The number of asthma cases is growing, and more people die from it every year. Warning signs of an asthma attack:

- Tightness in the chest
- Shortness of breath
- Wheezing
- Coughing

People with asthma who learn to spot the early signs of an attack can take medicine right away. This may make the attack less severe. If someone is having a severe asthma attack, get him or her to a hospital emergency room right away. Some signs of a severe attack:

- The person's asthma "rescue" medicine doesn't help within 15 minutes.
- The person's lips or fingernails are blue.
- The person has trouble walking or talking due to shortness of breath.

The most important thing to know about asthma is that you can control it. Asthma patients (or their parents) who learn what medicine to take and what triggers attacks can avoid them most of the time. That means people with asthma can lead normal lives.

Many types of medicine can treat asthma. Keep in mind that no one medicine works best for

everyone. You and your doctor have to work together to find the best medicine. Remember, it may take a while to find just the right kinds. Also, you must take the time to find out what sets off an attack.

There are two main types of asthma medicine. One kind you (or your child) take regularly to make the lungs less sensitive to the things that cause asthma attacks. It is important to take this medicine as prescribed, even if you feel OK. It usually takes a couple of weeks to work. The other type is called *rescue medicine*. You take this during an attack to help open up your breathing tubes so you can breathe better.

Some "everyday" asthma medicines are steroids. Some people may worry about them because they have heard stories about athletes who use steroids in the wrong way. Asthma steroids are not the same. Side effects of asthma steroids are also rare. Asthma patients usually breathe these medicines right into their lungs, so they only need a small dose.

### Asthma Triggers

No one knows what causes asthma. Lots of things set off asthma attacks, though. These things are called triggers. Some people have only one or two triggers. Other people have many.

Some triggers are things to which people are often allergic. Common ones are pollen (from trees and flowers) and dander (skin flakes from cats, dogs, and other pets). Also, some people are allergic to pests such as roaches, rodents, or dust mites. Dust mites are tiny spiders that you can't see. They are everywhere - in carpets, upholstered furniture, stuffed animals, and bedding. Cigarette smoke another common trigger of asthma attacks. Other triggers have nothing to do with allergies - cold weather, exercise, or strong feelings (laughing, crying).

### Other Common Asthma Triggers

- Dust
- Mold
- Cleaning products like furniture polish
- Personal care products like hair spray or perfume

### Allergies

Common signs of allergies include runny or stuffy noses, coughing, hives, itching, a rash, or puffy eyes. Allergies can be deadly. When sensitive people come in contact with something they're very allergic to, like peanuts, their blood pressure drops, their breathing tubes swell up, and they can die from lack of air. The good news is that allergies can be treated. If you have allergies, it's important to find out what causes them and how

to take care of them. A doctor can test you find out. People with severe allergies may need to carry emergency medicine.

### **Common Allergens**

An allergen is something that causes allergy signs, or an allergic reaction. Many of the asthma triggers listed above also cause allergic reactions in people who don't have asthma. There are many other allergens too. Some common ones are listed below. It's important to talk to your doctor if you have had a reaction to any of these:

- Roaches and rodents can trigger asthma and allergies. They need food, water, warmth, and shelter to survive. You can control roaches, mice, and other pests by making these things hard to get. Here are some tips to keep pests away:
  1. Store food in tightly sealed containers.
  2. Clean up crumbs and spills right away.
  3. Empty your garbage often.
  4. Wash your dirty dishes right after eating.
  5. Don't leave out pet food or water overnight.
  6. Fix plumbing leaks and drips.
  7. Seal cracks where pests hide or get into your home.

**Pets.** Furry pets, like dogs, cats, and gerbils can cause asthma and allergy attacks because of their saliva and skin flakes. It is best to either not have pets or keep them outside. If you do have pets inside, make sure to keep them out of sleeping areas and off fabric-covered furniture.

**Check your appliances.** Make sure your gas appliances, fireplace, furnace, or wood-burning stove have yearly checkups to keep down soot (and protect you from the dangers of carbon monoxide). Change or clean the filter on your furnace or air conditioner monthly.

**Smoking.** Cigarette, cigar, or pipe smoke causes health problems, especially for people with asthma. Although it is best to quit smoking, smoke outside and away from children. Don't light up in your car, because smoke will linger there and affect children.

**Mold.** When people breathe in mold, it can cause allergies and asthma to act up. Mold needs water to grow. Keep your home dry to control mold. That will also help with roaches and dust mites.

### **For More Information Contact**

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Healthy Indoor Air for America's Homes  
<http://www.healthyindoorair.org/>

The Soap and Detergent Association  
<http://www.cleaning101.com/house/>

The Allergy & Asthma Network: Mothers of Asthmatics. <http://www.aanma.org/>

The Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network (FAAN)  
<http://www.foodallergy.org/>

**Fact sheet source:** "Help Yourself to a Healthy Home", [www.uwex.edu/healthyhome/](http://www.uwex.edu/healthyhome/). Fact sheet written by Joseph Ponessa, Rutgers University Extension.