

# Acute Severe Asthma



## What is acute severe asthma?

Acute severe asthma is a sudden severe asthma attack. And it doesn't get better after taking asthma medicine. This type of asthma is life-threatening. If you think someone is having a severe asthma attack, call 911 right away. The main treatment is done in the emergency room and the hospital. But early treatment done by first responders can save lives.

## What causes acute severe asthma?

Any person with asthma can have an acute severe flare-up. Causes can include:

- Having an infection, such as a cold or sinus infection
- Having a severe allergic reaction
- Inhaling irritants like fumes from bleach or smoke
- Not taking prescribed medicine
- Exercising

## Who is at risk for acute severe asthma?

You may be at risk for acute severe asthma if you:

- Have had a severe asthma attack in the past
- Have trouble noticing when you are having asthma symptoms. Or how bad those symptoms are.
- Have asthma attacks even when using oral glucocorticoids
- Don't take your asthma medicines as prescribed
- Smoke
- Have other health problems, such as depression, heart disease, or lung disease

## What are the symptoms of acute severe asthma?

The symptoms of acute severe flare-ups often happen over hours or days. But they can come on faster. They are:

- Trouble breathing and wheezing that gets worse
- Fast breathing
- Cough and chest tightness that gets worse
- Inability to breathe when laying down
- Trouble walking and talking
- Sweating

- Fast heart rate
- Confusion or irritability

## How is acute severe asthma diagnosed?

Acute severe asthma is life-threatening. So quick diagnosis is important. Call 911 right away if you think you or someone you know is having a severe asthma attack, call right away. Healthcare providers will ask about your symptoms. They will give you a physical exam. You may need these tests:

- Peak expiratory flow. This test can gauge lung function.
- Pulse oximetry. This test measures the level of oxygen in your body.
- Chest X-ray. This test may be done in severe cases. Or it may be done if your healthcare provider thinks you may have some other health problem.

## How is acute severe asthma treated?

Treatment for acute severe asthma is often done in a hospital. Your healthcare provider will focus on opening up your airways. And helping you breathe easier. You may need:

- Medicines. Your healthcare provider will give you medicines to ease your symptoms. These may be inhaled or swallowed. Or given through an IV (intravenous) line.
- Magnesium sulfate. This may be used if other medicines don't work. It's given through an IV.
- Supplemental oxygen. This helps raise oxygen levels in your body.
- Ventilator. In very severe cases, you may be put on a machine to help you breathe. This is if other treatments don't work.

## What can I do to prevent severe acute asthma?

To help prevent acute severe flare-ups, be sure to:

- Know and stay away from those things that cause your flare-ups.
- Try to stay away from people who are sick.
- Wash your hands often.
- Talk with your healthcare provider about vaccines you should get.
- If you have severe allergies, go to an allergist.
- If you smoke, get help to quit. Stay away from secondhand. And thirdhand smoke, too.
- Take asthma medicines as directed. This includes your long-term control medicines. It's important to take them even if you feel like your asthma is under control.
- If exercise is a trigger, use your quick-relief medicine before you are active, if directed to do so by your healthcare provider. Keep an inhaler in your purse, gym bag, or backpack.
- Develop an Asthma Action Plan with your provider. Share the plan with your family members and close friends so they know when to call 911.

## When should I call my healthcare provider?

Call 911 right away if you are having an asthma attack and your symptoms don't get better after you take your quick-relief or rescue medicines.

## Key points about acute severe asthma

- Acute severe asthma is a sudden severe asthma attack that doesn't get better after taking asthma medicine.
- This type of asthma is life-threatening. Call 911 right away if you think you or someone you know is having a severe asthma attack.
- Acute severe asthma can have various causes. These include an infection or an allergic reaction.
- Treatment may include medicines and oxygen.
- You can prevent acute severe asthma by knowing and staying away from what triggers your asthma. And taking medicines as directed.
- An Asthma Action Plan can help you, your family, and friends know what treatments are needed and when to call 911.

## Next steps

Tips to help you get the most from a visit to your healthcare provider:

- Know the reason for your visit and what you want to happen.
- Before your visit, write down questions you want answered.
- Bring someone with you to help you ask questions and remember what your provider tells you.
- At the visit, write down the name of a new diagnosis, and any new medicines, treatments, or tests. Also write down any new instructions your provider gives you.
- Know why a new medicine or treatment is prescribed, and how it will help you. Also know what the side effects are.
- Ask if your condition can be treated in other ways.
- Know why a test or procedure is recommended and what the results could mean.
- Know what to expect if you do not take the medicine or have the test or procedure.
- If you have a follow-up appointment, write down the date, time, and purpose for that visit.
- Know how you can contact your provider if you have questions.

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