

Asthma

Asthma is a common condition that affects your breathing. It cannot currently be cured, but if it's well treated you should not have problems with symptoms.

Symptoms of asthma

The main symptoms of asthma are problems with breathing, such as:

- wheezing
- coughing
- shortness of breath
- your chest feeling tight

Asthma symptoms can be mild or severe. They usually come and go. They may be worse at night and early in the morning.

An asthma attack is when you have severe symptoms and it's difficult to breathe, which can be life-threatening.

Symptoms can be triggered by different things including exercise, high levels of air pollution, cold air, or contact with something you're allergic to, such as pollen, dust, mould or animals.

Asthma usually starts in children, but it can happen at any age.

See a GP if:

you or your child have asthma symptoms

you or your child have asthma and treatments are not helping, you're needing to use your inhaler more often, or you need advice about using your inhaler

you or your child have asthma and your symptoms are not improving or are stopping you doing your usual activities or waking you up at night

How to treat an asthma attack

If you're having an asthma attack, sit up straight, to help your breathing. Try to stay calm.

Use your asthma reliever inhaler if you have one:

If you have a blue reliever inhaler, take 1 puff every 30 to 60 seconds until you feel better, up to a maximum of 10 puffs. Shake the inhaler between each puff and use a spacer with the inhaler if you have one.

If you have an AIR or MART inhaler (used for both preventing and treating symptoms), take 1 puff every 1 to 3 minutes until you feel better, up to a maximum of 6 puffs.

If your personal asthma action plan has a different maximum dose for treating an asthma attack, follow the instructions in your plan.

Call 999 if:

You or someone else is having an asthma attack and:

start to feel worse at any time

do not feel better after taking the maximum dose using an asthma reliever inhaler

do not have an asthma inhaler

If symptoms are no better after 10 minutes and an ambulance has not arrived, use an asthma inhaler again if you have one, taking up to the same maximum dose.

Do not drive yourself to A&E.

The person you speak to at 999 will give you advice about what to do.

Ask for an urgent GP appointment if:

you've had an asthma attack and have recovered

Even if you feel better, it's important to see a GP within 2 days to discuss your treatment and get advice to help prevent another asthma attack.

How asthma is diagnosed

If you or your child have symptoms of asthma a GP or nurse will ask you some questions and listen to your chest.

You may need a simple breathing test to check for signs of asthma, and sometimes a blood test.

You may also be given a handheld device called a peak flow meter to use at home for a few weeks, to check how well your lungs are working.

Asthma can take some time to diagnose because the symptoms often vary over time and breathing problems can have different causes. If it's likely you have asthma, you may be offered asthma medicines to see if they help your symptoms.

Treatment for asthma

If you have asthma you'll be supported by a care team including a GP or nurse, and sometimes a specialist hospital doctor.

Your care team will explain how and when to use your medicines, how to monitor your asthma, ways to avoid triggers and reduce your symptoms, and what to do if your symptoms get worse.

This will be recorded in your asthma action plan, which you'll need to take to all your asthma appointments. You'll be given a printed or digital copy, or both.

You should have check-ups at least once a year to see how well your treatment is working. These will include checking that you're using your inhalers correctly and your asthma action plan is up to date.

Asthma inhalers

The main treatment for asthma is medicines you breathe in using an inhaler. For most people they work well to reduce or prevent asthma symptoms.

Depending on how severe your symptoms are, you may be offered either:

an inhaler to use only when you get symptoms – this is called an anti-inflammatory reliever (AIR) inhaler

an inhaler to use every day to help prevent symptoms, as well as when you get symptoms – this is called a maintenance and reliever therapy (MART) inhaler

2 separate inhalers – a preventer inhaler to use every day to help prevent symptoms, and a blue reliever inhaler to use when you get symptoms (you should not be given a blue reliever inhaler to use on its own)

Important: Using your inhaler

It's important to use your inhaler correctly so that your medicine works properly. There are different types, including dry powder inhalers, pMDIs and soft mist inhalers. A doctor, nurse or pharmacist will show you how to use yours.

Disposing of your inhalers

Return your empty, unwanted or expired inhalers to your local pharmacy.

When you put an inhaler in the bin, gases can leak out and contribute to climate change. Your local pharmacy can dispose of them safely.

Other treatments for asthma

If inhalers are not enough to stop your symptoms, your care team may also recommend a stronger inhaler or tablets that make breathing easier, such as montelukast.

If you have severe asthma that's not controlled by inhalers and tablets, you may be offered other treatments, such as medicines that you inject, called biological therapies.

Your care team will discuss with you which treatment is right for you, including any possible side effects.

Hospital treatment for an asthma attack

If you have a severe asthma attack that does not get better, you may need to be treated in hospital. Hospital treatments may include:

- oxygen through a mask
- using a nebuliser to breathe in high doses of medicine
- steroid tablets or injections

Information:

Find out more

- [Asthma and Lung UK: asthma treatments](#)
- [Asthma and Lung UK: videos showing how to use your inhaler](#)
- [NHS medicines A to Z: find your medicine](#)

Things you can do to help with asthma

If you have asthma there are things you can do to help prevent symptoms and reduce the risk of asthma attacks.

Do

always have your inhaler with you

use your inhalers as recommended by your care team

try to avoid things that trigger your asthma symptoms, such as air pollution, smoke, pollen or animals

exercise regularly – get advice from your doctor or nurse about exercising safely if exercise triggers your asthma symptoms

keep to a healthy weight

have vaccinations such as the flu vaccine – viruses such as flu can make asthma symptoms worse

Don't

do not smoke – get help to [quit smoking](#) if you need it

do not take medicines for other conditions without checking with a pharmacist or doctor – some medicines such as aspirin, ibuprofen and beta blockers can trigger asthma symptoms in some people

Find out more

- [Asthma and Lung UK: managing asthma](#)

How asthma affects your life

Asthma is often a life-long condition, although asthma in young children sometimes goes away by the time they're teenagers or adults.

Asthma affects everyone differently. How it affects you depends on your symptoms, what they're triggered by, and how well your treatment works.

For most people, inhalers work well to prevent or reduce symptoms if they're used correctly, and asthma has only a small impact on their daily life. But some people have more severe symptoms that are harder to control, and they need other treatment.

An asthma attack can be life-threatening. But getting the right asthma treatment reduces the risk.

Information:

Asthma and pregnancy

If you're pregnant, tell your doctor or midwife about your asthma. It's important to manage asthma in pregnancy to keep you and your baby well.

[Find out more about asthma and pregnancy](#)

Causes of asthma

Asthma symptoms happen when your airways become swollen. This makes them narrower, causing breathing problems.

In people who have asthma, symptoms can be triggered by different things, such as allergies, exercise, smoke, cold air or infections.

It's not fully understood what causes asthma. You may be more likely to get asthma if:

you have allergies such as eczema, hay fever or food allergies
other people in your family have asthma, hay fever, eczema or allergies
you were born prematurely or had a low birth weight
you were exposed to things like high levels of air pollution or cigarette smoke as a child
you had illnesses as a child that affected your breathing, such as bronchiolitis or croup
you're overweight
Asthma can also be caused by breathing in substances such as certain chemicals at work.

Help and support for asthma

As well as support from your healthcare team, you may find it helpful to get support from other people with asthma, either at a local support group or online.

There are also national charities that can offer support and information about asthma.

Asthma and Lung UK

Information and support for anyone affected by lung conditions including asthma.

- Website: www.asthmaandlung.org.uk
- Helpline: 0300 222 5800
- [Asthma and Lung UK: support in your area](#)
- [Asthma and Lung UK: living with a lung condition](#)

Allergy UK

Information and support for people living with allergies.

- Website: www.allergyuk.org
- Helpline: 01322 619898
- [Allergy UK: asthma](#)

Beat Asthma

Website for children and young people with asthma.

- Website: www.beatasthma.co.uk
- [Beat Asthma: information for families and children](#)

Source: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/asthma/>