

SECTION 9: COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS THE ASTHMA HANDBOOK



Is there a cure for asthma?

Currently there is no cure for asthma. However, in the majority of cases, asthma can be managed.

Does asthma go away?

Asthma is a chronic disease, which means that it never goes away. In a situation where asthma is caused by something in the workplace, removing the allergen can help minimize asthma. Many children seem to “outgrow” their asthma by puberty. Some of them remain symptom-free but for others symptoms may reappear in adult life.

Can I die from asthma?

Yes, but it is very rare. About 300 Canadians die each year from asthma. In most cases, asthma deaths can be prevented by proper asthma education and management.

Who gets asthma?

Canadian children have a 20 per cent chance of being diagnosed with asthma by age 12. There is a further 20 per cent chance of being diagnosed with asthma between the ages of 12 and 40 years. Under age 12, boys are about twice as likely as girls to develop asthma. After age 12, girls are more likely than boys to develop asthma.

Will my asthma get better if I move to a different climate?

While some symptoms may improve in a different climate, moving may expose you to new triggers that can cause breathing problems. For example, a warmer climate may have more air pollution and higher humidity. To avoid replacing one trigger with a different one when you move, it's a good idea to spend a trial period of several weeks to months in the new location. Don't move until you are sure there's a real improvement in your asthma symptoms. Consider also that your improvement might be due to leaving a pet at home, being away from a workplace trigger, or having less stress on holiday — factors that have nothing to do with climate at all.

What are the risks of not avoiding asthma triggers?

If you do not avoid your triggers, you will experience constant breathing problems. You risk having a severe asthma attack requiring a hospital visit.

Will an air cleaner help my asthma?

Indoor air quality is an important issue, particularly for those at high-risk including children, the elderly, pregnant women and people with a chronic lung condition.

You can improve indoor air quality by doing the following:

- Identify and eliminate the source of the problem, such as mould and cigarette smoke. See Section 5: Allergies and asthma for tips on eliminating mould.
- Increasing the amount of ventilation within the home to help ensure air is fresh.
- As a last resort, the use of a high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter with activated charcoal may provide some benefit. There must be a large amount of air going through the filter to provide this benefit. (Note: Electronic air cleaners or purifiers that produce ozone are not recommended as the ozone can make asthma worse.)

For more information about what you can do to improve the quality of the air in your home, speak to a certified asthma educator or respiratory educator or contact The Lung Association office nearest you.

Can having a pet at home reduce childhood asthma?

Maybe. Some studies suggest that there is some protective effect of having a pet. However, if a child develops asthma, continued exposure can lead to ongoing asthma.

Is taking steroids for asthma dangerous?

No. Corticosteroids for asthma are not the same as the muscle-building steroids that are banned by some sports organizations. The corticosteroids used to treat asthma are similar to the steroids produced naturally by the body. However, like most medications, corticosteroids can have unwanted side effects, especially when used in high doses for long periods of time. Talk to your doctor, pharmacist or certified asthma educator if you have questions about side effects.

Should I see an asthma specialist?

Talk to your doctor about seeing an asthma specialist if:

- Your asthma is not getting better even though you are avoiding your triggers and taking your medication.
- You have had to be admitted to the hospital or gone to the emergency department because of your asthma.

- There may be factors that require more in-depth assessment, such as a trigger in your workplace.

What is the difference between COPD and asthma? Can you have both?

Asthma is a chronic disease of the airways that is characterized by swelling, mucus production and tightening of the airway muscles. These symptoms can be treated and managed through education, environmental control and proper use of medications. Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is a disease that makes it difficult to move air into and out of the lungs due to permanent damage caused by breathing in harmful materials, such as tobacco smoke, over time. In COPD, there is also swelling of the airways and excessive mucus production but these symptoms are only partially reduced by medications. A person can have both asthma and COPD at the same time.

What are some other diseases and conditions that can affect asthma?

Gastroesophageal reflux disease is sometimes called GERD or acid reflux. It is a chronic condition in which acid from the stomach backs up into your throat. The stomach acid may cause breathing problems when it comes in contact with the lining of your throat and airways. The exact connection between GERD and asthma is not completely understood yet, but studies have shown that GERD can cause asthma.

Heart disease is a condition that affects the heart muscle or the blood vessels of the heart. A person with heart disease may be taking a medication that decreases blood pressure. This group of drugs (known as non-specific beta-blockers) should not be used by people who also have asthma because these drugs increase the risk of having a severe asthma attack.

Glaucoma is an eye disease in which the normal pressure of the fluid inside the eyes slowly rises, leading to vision loss or even blindness. There is a very low risk of developing glaucoma from using inhaled steroids to manage asthma. People aged 65 years or older who are receiving unusually high doses of inhaled steroids (greater than 1500 µg per day) should have their eye pressure monitored during their annual eye exam to detect glaucoma.

Arthritis is an inflammatory disorder of the joints that can produce pain and swelling. Arthritis can be treated with called non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. People with both arthritis and asthma should be aware of the possibility that they may also be sensitive to Aspirin.

Aspirin triad is a condition in which people have asthma, an aspirin sensitivity and nasal polyps (soft, non-cancerous growths).

Aspirin triad is a condition in which people have asthma, an Aspirin sensitivity and nasal polyps (soft, non-cancerous growths that develop on the lining of your nose). Talk to your doctor or certified asthma educator for more information on this condition.

Osteoporosis is a disease in which bones become fragile and more likely to break. One cause of osteoporosis is the continued use of high doses of steroids, a type of medication used to treat swelling and inflammation. The risk of developing osteoporosis from using inhaled steroids to manage asthma is very low.

How should I prepare for a visit with my doctor?

1. Always prepare a list of the questions you want your doctor to answer. At the doctor's office, it's easy to forget things.
2. Keep a list of all the symptoms you are experiencing. Be honest. If you don't tell the doctor all the details of your health, you won't get the treatment you need.
3. Bring along all the medications you are taking for your asthma and for any other conditions. If you're not sure you're taking your medications correctly, now is the time to ask.
4. Bring a pad of paper to record what the doctor tells you about your asthma and about any tests or medications you may need.
5. Bring along a relative or friend to your appointment. If you miss some information or forget something, someone is there to back you up.
6. Listen carefully. If you don't understand what the doctor says, ask for an explanation. Keep asking until you do understand.
7. Ask your doctor for an asthma action plan if you don't already have one.
8. Ask your doctor whether there are resources in your community that could benefit and support you.
9. If you get home from your doctor's visit and realize you missed a question or don't understand something the doctor told you, phone back immediately and ask for more information.

