

Asthma Control and Management

There are different ways of classifying asthma. Working with your healthcare provider to understand the severity of your asthma will help you best manage it. This fact sheet focuses on mild or moderate types of asthma.

	Very Mild	Mild	Moderate	Severe
Treatment to control symptoms	Well controlled with reliever needed only occasionally.	Well controlled with single low dose controller. Reliever needed twice a week or less.	Well controlled with low to moderate dose dual controller with occasional reliever needed twice a week or less.	Controlled with high dose dual controller and additional medications with reliever needed twice a week or less. OR unable to achieve control.

Almost all asthma can be well controlled! When it is, you can do more and feel better and live a healthy, active life.

WHAT'S AN ASTHMA FLARE-UP?

An asthma flare-up happens when your airways become more sensitive and the muscles around them go into spasm. This makes your airways too narrow to breathe easily. You may cough, wheeze, become breathless. Young children may breathe quickly or have other symptoms.

An asthma attack can seem to happen suddenly if your asthma is not in good control when you are exposed to one of your triggers (see below). It can also happen slowly over time as your airways slowly become more sensitive. It is important to know how to recognize the signs of worsening asthma, to know what to do when this happens.

This is when your Asthma Action Plan will come in handy!

How do I know if my asthma is well-controlled?

Take this simple test to find out:

	Yes	No
Do you experience daytime symptoms such as a cough, wheezing, shortness of breath and/or chest tightness more than 2 days a week?		
Do you experience symptoms during the nighttime once a week or more?		
Does asthma limit your physical activities?		
Do you ever have asthma flare-ups?		
Do you miss work or school because of your asthma?		
Do you need your reliever medication/inhaler more than 2 times a week?		

Answering YES to any ONE of these questions may mean that your asthma is not well-controlled. You may wish to make an appointment to talk to your healthcare provider or a Certified Respiratory Educator (CRE) to talk about what you can do. If you do not have a CRE, call the Lung Health Line at 1-866-717-2673 or 1-888-344-5864.

Managing Asthma

You can be symptom-free when your asthma is well controlled. Keeping your asthma under control is key to living an active lifestyle.

The best way to do this is to:

- Take your asthma medication as prescribed,
- Follow your asthma action plan,
- Avoid asthma triggers, allergens, and viruses, and
- Know what to do if you have an asthma flare-up.

It's vital to take your asthma medication as prescribed to avoid your symptoms worsening or having an asthma flare-up. Even if you feel well, it is very important to keep taking your controller medication. Asthma is a chronic (long-term) disease and taking your medications will help to keep it under control.

Ask your healthcare provider (or team member) to:

- Talk to you about your asthma medications,
- Show you how to take your inhalers,
- Help you complete your asthma action plan.

An asthma action plan is a step-by-step guide. It tells you what symptoms to look out for and how to adjust your medications according to your symptoms. If you do not have an asthma action plan, speak to your healthcare provider to ensure they provide you with one.

You can also download one on www.lung.ca.

What kinds of things can affect control of my asthma?

Asthma Triggers

Triggers are things that can make your asthma symptoms worse or cause an asthma flare-up. If you know your triggers, you can take measures to avoid them and help keep your asthma under control. Triggers can be categorized into two types:

- **Allergic triggers (allergens)** such as pet hair, dust mites, molds, and pollen.
- **Irritants** such as cold air, tobacco smoke, campfire or wildfire smoke, vapour clouds from vaping products, dust, air pollution, strongly scented products, and cleaning products.
- **Other:** Viral infections, e.g. colds, flu, hormones, emotional stress, exercise.

Triggers can cause airway swelling, increased amounts of mucus (phlegm) and tightening of the muscles around your airways. This can lead to worsening of your asthma symptoms. What triggers asthma symptoms is different for each person.

Irritants can bother anyone, but allergens only affect people who are allergic to specific things. The effects of allergens and infections can last longer and can be more severe than the effects of irritants.

Asthma symptoms can include shortness of breath, chest tightness, wheezing, sputum production, and cough.

Allergens

If you are allergic to something, your body's immune (defense) system reacts to the allergen by causing inflammation (swelling) and airway narrowing. This can trigger your asthma. Dust mites, animal dander (dandruff) and secretions, pollens, and molds are common allergens. Additives such as sulphites may also trigger asthma symptoms. Food is not a common trigger of asthma.

Dust Mites

- Dust mites are microscopic insects that feed on dead skin cells. They love warm, moist places such as mattresses, pillows, and bedding. They are also found in carpeting, plush furniture and stuffed animals.

Pet Allergens

- Animals shed hair, feathers, and dander (dandruff) regularly. The dander, urine and saliva of animals can be allergens. Since all furry animals have dander and all birds have feathers, there is no such thing as a non-allergenic furry or feathered pet.

Pollen and Mold Allergens

- Pollens and molds are common allergens that can trigger asthma.
- Molds can grow indoors in damp places, such as bathrooms, basements, humidifiers, air conditioners and around windows. Outdoor molds are common in the spring, summer and particularly in the fall, until after the first frost.
- Tree pollen is common in the spring, grass pollens are high in early summer, and ragweed is common from late summer until the first frost.

Cockroach Allergens

- Cockroaches thrive in damp areas where food waste has not been removed, such as in kitchens.

Irritants

There are many possible irritants where people live and work that can trigger asthma symptoms. You may notice that your asthma symptoms get triggered by some of the following irritants:

Indoor Irritants

Most people are aware of the problems linked to outdoor air pollution, but many don't realize that indoor air pollution can be just as bad, if not worse.

The following indoor air pollutants can trigger asthma symptoms:

- Tobacco smoke,
- Cleaning products with strong smells,
- Non-erasable markers,
- Wood smoke (fireplaces, wood stoves),
- Scented products

Outdoor Irritants

Just as there are things that can trigger asthma symptoms indoors, there are also things that may trigger your asthma symptoms outdoors.

The following can trigger asthma symptoms:

- Air pollution (e.g., from vehicles, industry, power generation),
- Cold, dry air,
- Hot, humid weather, and
- Smoke from forest fires, wood burning, or backyard burning.

Air quality forecasts and information are available at weather.gc.ca. Depending on the forecast and information available, you may want to adjust your outdoor activity.

Other triggers

Viral infections

Viral respiratory infections cause asthma to flare-up in both children and adults. Some viral respiratory infections, like influenza, also cause pneumonia.

Hormones

Speak to your healthcare provider about a plan for your asthma if you notice your symptoms change monthly, or you are pregnant.

Emotional stress and exercise

These should not trigger asthma symptoms if your asthma is in good control. Speak to your healthcare provider if you are having symptoms during stress or with exercise.



What can I do to keep my asthma well-controlled?

Avoid Asthma Triggers

Your healthcare team might refer you for allergy testing to identify your allergic triggers. Allergy testing can test for allergies to dust mites, animal dander and pollen. It can sometimes take time to find out what your asthma triggers are, especially your non-allergic triggers. Keeping an asthma diary may help you identify your personal asthma triggers.

Colds, flu, and other viral infections can also worsen asthma symptoms. To help avoid catching a viral infection, you can:

- Follow public health guidelines to lower your chance of infection.
- Wash your hands regularly, and properly for a minimum of 20 seconds with soap and water.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth.
- Avoid visiting people who you know are unwell with cold, flu, or another virus.
- Keep your vaccinations up to date, including your influenza (flu), pneumonia, and COVID-19 vaccines.



Knowing what triggers your asthma is an important step to understanding what will keep your asthma well-controlled. Avoiding those triggers, whenever possible, is important to your overall lung health.

Avoid paint fumes (buy low odour paints). Make your home and vehicle smoke-free. If you smoke, speak to your healthcare team about getting help to quit smoking. Your asthma medications will work better if you quit smoking. For more information on quitting see www.lung.ca/tobacco.

Asthma Medication

There are two main types of asthma medications – controllers and relievers.

Controller medications are usually used on a daily basis to control and prevent asthma symptoms. Reliever medications are taken as needed to quickly relieve asthma symptoms.

Many asthma medications come in inhaled delivery devices, also commonly known as inhalers or puffers. Knowing how to use your inhaler correctly is important in ensuring the medicine is working as it should.

Talk to your healthcare provider if you are unsure about how to use your inhaler properly, or if you have questions about how your asthma medicine works. Download our Asthma Medications guide to learn more about your medications. You can also view helpful tutorial videos on how to use your inhaler on <https://www.lung.ca/lung-health/get-help/how-use-your-inhaler>.



Is there a tool available to help me keep track of my asthma control?

An asthma diary is a tool that you can use to help you monitor your asthma control. An asthma diary allows you to track your symptoms, medication use, peak flow meter readings and asthma triggers.

By tracking these things, you and your healthcare provider will get a good picture of whether or not your asthma is well-controlled and may help identify your personal asthma triggers.

Is there a tool available that outlines the steps to take when my asthma symptoms worsen?

An asthma action plan is a tool that outlines the steps to take when your asthma symptoms worsen. An asthma action plan is a written set of instructions developed with your healthcare provider that outlines how to adjust your medications, when to call your healthcare provider, and when to seek emergency treatment and care.

An asthma action plan can change, so it is important to review it each time you see your healthcare provider. Download your Asthma Action plan on www.lung.ca Always bring it with you to your appointments!

References:

- Yang CL, Hicks EA, Mitchell P, et al. Canadian Thoracic Society 2021 guideline update: Diagnosis and management of asthma in preschoolers, children, and adults. *Can J Respir Crit Care Sleep Med.* 2021. DOI:
- Yang CL, Hicks EA, Mitchell P, et al. Canadian Thoracic Society Guideline – A focused update on the management of very mild and mild asthma. *Can J Respir Crit Care Sleep Med.* 2021. DOI: 10.1080/24745332.2021.1877043
- Loughheed MD, Lemiere C, Dell SD, et al. Canadian Thoracic Society Asthma Management Continuum – 2010 Consensus Summary for children six years of age and over, and adults. *Can Respir J.* 2010;17(1):15-24.
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ASTHMA CARE: MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR HEALTHCARE PROVIDER APPOINTMENTS

HEALTHCARE PROVIDER'S INFO

Name: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

NEXT APPOINTMENT

Date: _____

Time: _____

This guide is designed to help you have more open conversations with your healthcare provider about your asthma. There are suggestions for what you can do before, during and after your appointments.

1. BEFORE YOUR VISIT: GATHER THE DETAILS : WHAT IS YOUR EXPERIENCE?

Use this checklist to show your healthcare provider information about how you've been doing since your last visit. Recording your asthma symptoms—whether they're new symptoms or ones you've had for a while—may give your healthcare provider a more complete picture of how asthma is affecting your life, and how to best treat and manage your asthma.

Ask yourself: Since your last appointment:

- Have you noticed any changes in your asthma symptoms?
- Have you had asthma symptoms during the daytime more than twice a week?
- Have your asthma symptoms woken you up at night?
- Have you had any concerns about taking your current asthma medications as prescribed?
- Have you had any challenges in taking your controller medications every day?
- Have you used a reliever (rescue) inhaler more than twice a week?
- Has your asthma limited what you can do at work, school, or at home?
- Has your asthma limited your physical activity?
- IN THE LAST YEAR, have you had an emergency visit with a healthcare provider due to asthma? This includes a visit to the emergency department or admission to hospital.

Make notes of any challenges you have had managing your asthma including any other health symptoms changes that may or may not be related to your asthma (Example: allergies, changes with your skin, GERD (Gastroesophageal reflux disease), rhinitis (inflammation of the nose) etc.

2. DURING YOUR VISIT: SHARE AND ASK

Fill out this list and share it with your healthcare provider. Together, they can show a more complete picture of the impact asthma is having on your life.

Be honest with your answers.

- Ways I've tried to manage my asthma in the past are: _____

- I am worried about: _____

- If my asthma were better controlled, I could: _____

- My long-term treatment goals are: _____

- Other concerns: _____

During your appointment, write down answers to the questions that you ask your healthcare provider.

- How can I better control my asthma? _____
- Can we develop an asthma action plan together? _____
- What type of asthma do I have and how can it affect me? _____
- What diet and exercise regimen do you recommend for me? _____
- How can I avoid or reduce exposure to my personal asthma triggers? What about triggers I cannot easily avoid? _____

- What can I do when my asthma is especially difficult to manage? _____

3. AFTER YOUR VISIT: STAY ON TRACK: KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK

After your visit, continue to keep track of your symptoms. Make notes of any challenges you have or changes you notice. Then, revisit and complete these activities before your appointments and share the information with your healthcare provider.

For more information and resources on asthma visit www.lung.ca