

# BREATHE WELL, LIVE WELL



## Prevent and manage asthma attacks

Once you have asthma, it doesn't go away. There is no cure. But you can take steps to make living with asthma easier.

Asthma causes the airways in the lungs to swell up. This can make it hard to breathe. It can also cause coughing, wheezing and chest tightness.

When asthma “flares up,” it’s called an asthma attack. These attacks can be mild or severe. In some cases they can be deadly. Every day in America, asthma is the reason:<sup>1</sup>

- 40,000 people miss school or work.
- 5,000 people visit the emergency room.
- 11 people die.

Exposure to tobacco smoke, certain infections and some allergens early in life may make you more likely to develop asthma.<sup>1</sup> Your family history also plays a part. If one or both of your parents have asthma, you are likely to have it, too.

## What happens during an asthma attack?

If you have asthma, your airways are always a bit swollen. That makes you react to triggers more than other people do. Asthma triggers irritate the airways – like cold air, stress and things you’re allergic to.<sup>2</sup>

When you’re exposed to a trigger:

- The airways may swell up more than normal.
- The airways may make more mucus than normal.
- The muscles around the airways may tighten.

All of these changes keep you from getting enough air into your lungs – and getting enough oxygen in your blood. This can prevent vital organs from working, which can cause death.

## What can cause an asthma attack?

If you have asthma, your doctor can help you figure out your triggers. The most common ones are:<sup>2</sup>

- Animal dander
- Cigarette smoke
- Cockroaches
- Cold air or changes in weather
- Dust mites
- Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD); heartburn
- Infections like colds, bronchitis or pneumonia
- Medicines like aspirin and beta blockers
- Mold
- Pollen
- Pollution
- Stress, laughing hard, crying
- Strong smells from painting, cooking, perfumes, etc.

## RESOURCES

For details about support groups and asthma-friendly products, visit the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America website at: [aafa.org](http://aafa.org)

For online tools – including action plans and peak flow tracking logs – check out the National Jewish Medical and Research Center website at: [nationaljewish.org](http://nationaljewish.org)

## Managing your asthma

If you've been diagnosed with asthma, your doctor may talk to you about:

- A quick-relief drug or long-term control drug that may be right for you.
- A peak flow meter, a small tool that measures how quickly and forcefully you can breathe out after taking a deep breath.<sup>3</sup> It can give you an early warning that an asthma attack is about to happen.

Also, you and your doctor will work together to create an action plan. The plan has two parts. Part one is a plan for normal days. Part two is an emergency plan for when you have attacks.

Once you have a plan, pay close attention to your asthma to make sure it does not get worse. You may need to change your plan if:<sup>2</sup>

- You have symptoms more often.
- Your symptoms are getting worse.
- You are losing sleep or missing school or work because of asthma.
- Your peak flow meter shows a low number, or the number varies a lot from day to day.
- You have to use your quick-relief drug more often (every day is too often).
- Your drugs don't seem to be working well anymore.
- You have to visit your doctor or the emergency room because of an attack, or you are hospitalized due to your asthma.

1 Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America: *Asthma Facts and Figures* (November 2011): [aafa.org](http://aafa.org).

2 National Heart Lung and Blood Institute: *Health Topics: Asthma* (November 2011): [nhlbi.nih.gov](http://nhlbi.nih.gov).

3 Your plan may or may not cover peak flow meters. For details about what your plan does and does not cover, check your member handbook or call the Customer Service phone number on your ID card.