

# Living well with asthma

## What Is Asthma?

Asthma is a disease that causes the air passages in your lungs to swell or narrow, making it harder for you to breathe.

Asthma symptoms include coughing, wheezing, chest tightness, and shortness of breath. More than 17 million Americans live with asthma. Although there's no cure for it yet, there are many things you can do to feel much better.



Normal



During Asthma Attack

## What Causes an Asthma Attack?

Some people with asthma also have allergies—that is, they are sensitive to certain things that don't bother most people. Allergies can trigger an asthma attack by irritating already sensitive airways. Some common “triggers” include dust mites, mold, animal dander, foods, cigarette smoke, strong odors, and infections. Some things don't trigger asthma, but can bother people with asthma: aspirin, colds, flu, dirty air, emotions (like laughing or crying).

## What Can You Do to Feel Your Best?

It is best to stay away from triggers and things that make your asthma worse. Try to stay away from dirty air by not smoking and by not being around people who do. Also, avoid baby powder, talcum powder, perfume, moth balls, air fresheners, spray deodorants, and hair spray.

To protect yourself, use a fan when you cook, give your pet a bath, clean damp areas, keep doors and windows closed, use an air conditioner, and wear a mask when around your most severe triggers. Also, it is important to always bring your medicine with you wherever you go. And remember, if you have questions, call your doctor, nurse, or clinic.

## See Your Doctor

Your doctor plays an important role in managing your asthma. You can count on your doctor to:

- Provide you with information about asthma
- Evaluate your asthma symptoms
- Help you determine your asthma triggers
- Prescribe medication for you and explain how they work
- Show you how to use an inhaler and your peak flow meter



Remember to do your part and report to your doctor any changes in your breathing. Your doctor will fine tune your treatment plan to help you feel your best.

## What are the Three Asthma Zones?

Your asthma action plan involves using a inhaler called a peak flow meter to measure how well your lungs are working. First thing every morning, measure your peak flow three times. The highest reading is your current peak flow.

The following three asthma zones help you determine which medicines you should be taking, depending on your peak flow reading:

### Green Zone

- Your current peak flow is over 80% of your personal best.
- Your asthma is okay; you feel good.
- You only need to use the long-term control medicines indicated in your action plan.

### Yellow Zone

- Your current peak flow is 50% to 79% of your personal best.
- Your asthma is acting up; you don't feel as good.
- You might cough, wheeze, or be short of breath.
- CAUTION: You need to follow your action plan and take the quick-relief medicines for your yellow zone.

### Red Zone

- Your current peak flow is less than 50% of your personal best.
- Your asthma is bad; you are having an asthma attack.
- You could have trouble breathing or have pain in your chest.
- ALERT: Take your red zone medications and get help for your asthma now.

## Finding Your “Personal Best” Peak Flow

Measure your peak flow every day for 2 weeks when your asthma is under control. The highest number over this 2-week period is your “personal best” peak flow, which will serve as the base-line for future peak flow readings.



## What Asthma Medications Can Help Make You Feel Better

There are two kinds of asthma medicines:

1. *Quick-relief* medicines help you breathe better when you have asthma. Often called bronchodilators (brong-ko-die-lay-ters), these medicines open the airways quickly to relieve asthma symptoms. Your doctor may tell you to take this medicine when you have an asthma attack. You may also be told to take this medicine before you exercise.
2. *Long-term control* medicines help stop the asthma symptoms before they start. Most control medications work by reducing the inflammation in your airways; others work either by relaxing the airways or by blocking your body's response to asthma triggers. These medicines are taken every day or as directed by your doctor.

## Use Your Metered Dose Inhaler Correctly

Metered-Dose Inhalers (MDIs) utilize a pressurized canister to propel medication into the lungs as you inhale – similar to an aerosol can. To operate an MDI properly, follow these steps:

### PREPARE

1. Shake the inhaler hard. Take off the cap.
2. Breathe out gently through your mouth as much air as you can.
3. • For the closed-mouth method, put the opening of the inhaler in your mouth, OR
  - For the open-mouth method, put your first 2 fingers in a “V” shape. Then hold the inhaler that far away from your mouth (about 2 inches), OR
  - If you use a spacer, put the opening of the spacer in your mouth.

### INHALE

4. Quickly press down on the inhaler and breathe in slowly as much as you can.
5. Hold your breath for about 10 seconds. Then breathe out slowly through your nose. (If you use a spacer, your doctor may tell you to exhale twice into the spacer for each puff.)
6. If your doctor told you to take more than 1 puff, wait at least 1 minute. Shake the inhaler and take a second puff.



## Use Your Dry Powder Inhaler Correctly

A Dry Powder Inhaler (DPI) utilizes your lung power rather than propellents to draw medication into the lungs from the inhaler. DPIs come in several forms. Some are shaped like MDIs, but feature a mouthpiece at the top of the inhaler rather than the bottom. Others come in a disk shape with a cover that is rotated to access the mouthpiece inside. See the illustrations for examples of common DPIs.

To use your DPI, follow these steps:

### PREPARE

1. Remove the DPI from its packaging. Note: while all medications are prone to expiration if not used over time, some have shorter expirations than others. Be sure to discard the product promptly after the expiration date.
2. Remove cap or open the inhaler cover.
3. Some DPIs must be primed the first time they are used. Read your DPI's instructions to determine if priming is required. You will have to prime your DPI only once.
4. Load the medication. Most DPIs require you to rotate the inhaler's base or slide a lever to load a measured dose of medication. If your DPI has a counter telling you how many doses you have left, this counter will count down by one. Some DPIs require you to load powder capsules, which come in a blister card. After loading, you must pierce the capsules by pressing buttons or levers to release the dose.



### INHALE

1. Before inhaling, breathe out as far as is comfortable (but not into the mouthpiece).
2. Tilt head back slightly, place mouthpiece in mouth, and close lips.
3. Breathe in fast, steadily, and deeply. Remove the inhaler from your mouth. Hold your breath for about 10 seconds, or as long as is comfortable. Exhale.
4. Rinse your mouth with water and gargle (but do not swallow) to prevent mouth and throat irritation.

