

What is Asthma?

Asthma is a disease that affects your lungs, making it harder to breathe.

The symptoms of asthma are warning signs for you to take action. In fact, if you neglect them, you are more likely to have an asthma attack.

An asthma attack could ruin your day, or even lead to a trip to the emergency room.

“It was like kind of like breathing through like a straw. Like if you hold your nose, try to breathe through a straw, there’s not much air going in and then once you get enough air in, it’s like it stops you. Can’t inhale it anymore.”

“It just feels really, real tight and hard to breathe out and real fast though breathing.”

Let’s look at your airways to understand how asthma affects your breathing.

When you breathe, air travels into the nose or mouth. The air moves down the trachea, or windpipe, into the airways. These airways are a series of tubes ending at the alveoli.

Alveoli are tiny balloon-like air sacs that transfer oxygen into the blood and allow carbon dioxide to exit.

There are over 300 million alveoli in your lungs!

When you have asthma, your airways, or the tubes that carry air in and out of the lungs, are very sensitive. That means if you breathe in certain particles from your environment, called triggers, your airways can react.

When you breathe in a trigger, your airways become inflamed and swollen. As a result, your airways narrow.

Excessive mucus is produced, which further clogs the airways. And the muscles around the airways can tighten up, or spasm, narrowing them even further.

These reactions to a trigger decrease the amount of air that can travel through the airways.

Oxygen entering your body is reduced and the amount of carbon dioxide in your body can build up.

During an asthma attack, you may react by coughing, having shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, wheezing, or tightness in the chest. You may notice these symptoms anytime - day or night.

“One asthmatic might wake up coughing a lot in the night, early morning, or having a lot of cough with sports and exercise, or when they get a cold. They almost get bronchitis-like symptoms where they’re coughing for days and days, maybe even weeks. Some people get tightness of their chest on a frequent basis. Maybe when they’re around something they’re allergic to they’ll get chest tightness and heaviness. Sometimes it’s shortness of breath with getting a cold. Cold weather can cause these symptoms.”

If you have questions about your asthma, ask your healthcare provider.

What is Asthma?

With help from your healthcare provider, you can learn the skills you need to prevent or reduce your symptoms and manage your asthma.