



## Asthma

### What is Asthma?

Asthma is a chronic inflammatory disease of the airways – the small tubes that carry air in and out of the lungs. The short story is that having asthma makes it harder to breathe. The long story is that it can be challenging to manage and it significantly impacts the quality of life for many Canadians. In rare cases an asthma attack can be fatal. The good news is that asthma can be treated.

Asthma is caused by swelling and inflammation of the airway lining. Increased mucus production and tightening of muscles around the airways blocks the flow of air through the lungs. In people with asthma, the lining of the airways is more sensitive to things such as cold air, exercise, and allergens, which can cause asthma attacks.

### What are the symptoms?

When someone is suffering from asthma, their symptoms could include:

- Shortness of breath
- Tightness in the chest
- Coughing
- Wheezing

Asthma symptoms can be very unpredictable, which can create challenges for those learning to control them. Symptoms may vary over time and will vary from person to person. The severity of episodes can fluctuate from mild to moderate or severe.

### Who gets it and why?

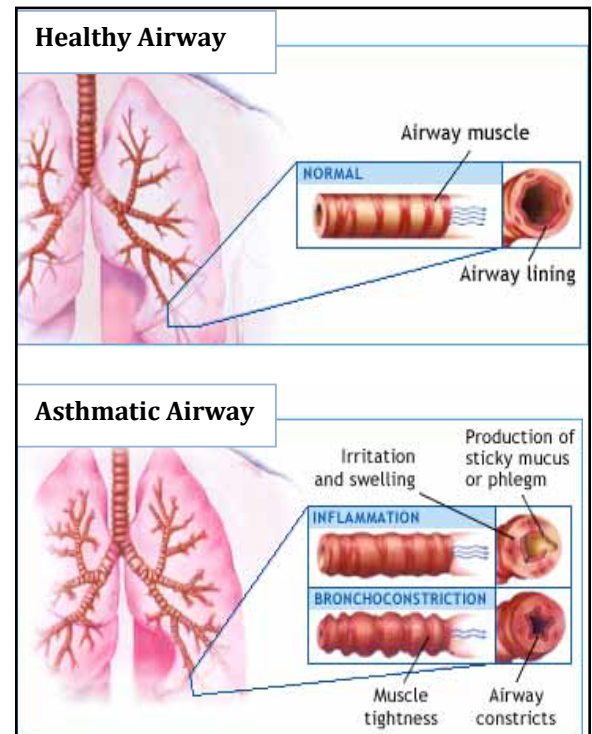
Anyone can develop asthma at any age, though it is most often diagnosed in children and youth.

The causes are not well understood although asthma can run in families (i.e. have a genetic connection), and is often associated with allergies. Environmental factors may also play a role in some cases, with repeated exposures to certain substances or pollutants believed to cause asthma in some individuals.

### What triggers an attack?

While triggers will be different for every person, most people with asthma will be triggered by at least one of the following:

- Air pollutants
- Animals
- Cold temperatures
- Dust mites
- Exercise
- Mould
- Pollen
- Stress/anxiety
- Tobacco smoke
- Viral infections



Images courtesy of Asthma Society of Canada

### The Top 10 Asthma Myths\*

1. Asthma is all in your head.
2. Asthma can be cured.
3. Everyone who has asthma is the same.
4. I only have asthma when I have trouble breathing.
5. I only need to take my medication when I have trouble breathing.
6. I can stop taking my controller medication as soon as I feel better.
7. My child will outgrow her asthma.
8. Steroids are dangerous, so I do not want my child taking them.
9. Steroids will stunt my child's growth.
10. If I have asthma, I have to avoid sports and physical activity.

\*Courtesy of National Asthma Patients



### Controlling asthma

Asthma is controlled best through a combination of asthma medications and good lifestyle choices like healthy diet, adequate rest, and keeping a lid on stress. Doctors and certified asthma educators will work with patients suffering from asthma to develop a customized asthma action plan (AAP). The AAP describes when to increase or decrease medications, and when to seek emergency help.

### Successful asthma control means:

- No daytime symptoms
- No nighttime symptoms
- No need to use reliever medication more than 4 times in a week
- No school or work absenteeism due to asthma
- Normal breathing tests



### Asthma and allergy

People with asthma may also have allergies that make their asthma worse. For people with both conditions, effective management of allergies will support better asthma control. The essentials are to know and avoid allergy triggers, take allergy medicines as prescribed by a doctor, and follow the AAP. For more information on allergy, see our Allergy Fact Sheet.

### The benefits of clean air and active lifestyles

Being physically active is a key building block of health. It's especially important for children who need it for growth and development. Research is showing that regular activity can help support better asthma control. Exercise also reduces the risk of developing other chronic diseases, reduces stress, and supports better sleep and well-being.

### Fast Facts on Asthma

- Affects 3 million Canadians and 10-18% of Canadian children
- Well controlled asthma enables totally normal lifestyles and activity levels – yet more than half of asthma sufferers don't have it under control
- It's the leading cause of school absenteeism, and third leading cause of work absenteeism
- The prevalence of asthma is twice as high in boys as it is in girls under 14 years of age.
- Women aged 40 years have a greater prevalence of asthma than do men of the same age.

Anyone with asthma can exercise safely but it's important to work with a doctor or health care professional to get it right. Be sure to check the Air Quality Health Index to choose when and where to exercise.

### For more information on asthma:

[Asthma Society of Canada](#)  
[Asthma Kids](#)

[Canadian Lung Association](#)  
[National Asthma Patients Alliance](#)