

Help Yourself to a Healthy Home **Asthma and Allergies**

SHOULD YOU BE CONCERNED?

More than eight million children in the United States have a disease called *asthma*. Asthma is a leading reason that children miss school or end up in the hospital. Asthma makes it hard for people to breathe. Sometimes people even die from asthma. This disease has no cure yet, but it can be controlled.

Another 40 to 50 million people have allergies. Allergies can also make it hard for people to breathe by causing an asthma attack. An allergy is an unusual reaction to something, like a food or a plant, which is normally harmless. Common signs of allergies are a stuffy or runny nose, itching, or a rash. This section will help you ask the right questions to find out how to make your home a safer, healthier place for people with asthma or allergies.

The most important thing to know about asthma is that you can control it. Asthma patients (or their parents) who learn what medicine to take and what triggers attacks can avoid them most of the time. That means people with asthma can lead normal lives.

Many types of medicine treat asthma. Keep in mind that no one medicine works best for everyone. You and your doctor have to work together to find the best medicine. Remember, it may take a while to find just the right kinds. Also, you must take the time to find out what sets off an attack.

There Are Two Main Types of Asthma Medicine.

One kind you (or your child) take regularly to make the lungs less sensitive to the things that cause asthma attacks. It is important to take this medicine as prescribed, even if you feel okay. It usually takes a couple of weeks to work.

The other type is called *rescue medicine*. You take this during an attack to help open up your breathing tubes so you can breathe better.

Some “everyday” asthma medicines are *steroids*. Some people may worry about them because they have heard stories about athletes who use steroids in the wrong way. Asthma steroids are not the same. Side effects of asthma steroids are also rare. Asthma patients usually breathe these medicines right into their lungs, so they only need a small dose.

What Happens During an Asthma Attack?

Asthma flare-ups are called asthma attacks. During an attack, the breathing tubes in your lungs, called *bronchi* and *bronchioles*, get smaller. During an asthma attack:

- The breathing tubes in your lungs swell up.
- The muscles around these tubes tighten.
- The tubes make large amounts of a thick fluid called mucus.

You cannot catch asthma. It does run in families, though. If someone in your family has it, you or your children may too. The number of asthma cases is growing, and more people die from it every year. These deaths do not need to happen.

Warning Signs of an Asthma Attack

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

People with asthma who learn to spot the early signs of an attack can take medicine right away. This may make the attack less severe.

If someone is having a severe asthma attack, take him or her to a hospital emergency room right away. Some signs of a severe attack:

- The person's asthma *rescue* or *inhaler* medicine doesn't help within 15 minutes.
- The person's lips or fingernails are blue.
- The person has trouble walking or talking due to some shortness of breath.

Asthma Triggers

No one knows what causes asthma. Lots of things set off asthma attacks, though. These things are called *triggers*. Some people have only one or two triggers. Other people have many. Some triggers are things to which people are often allergic. Common ones are *pollen* (from trees and flowers) and *dander* (skin flakes from cats, dogs, and other pets). Also some people are allergic to pests such as roaches, rodents, or *dust mites*. Dust mites are tiny insects that you can't see. They live everywhere—in carpets, upholstered furniture, stuffed animals, and bedding. *Cigarette smoke* is another common trigger of asthma attacks. Other triggers have nothing to do with allergies—cold weather, exercise, or strong feelings (laughing or crying).

Other Common Asthma Triggers:

- Dust
- Mold
- Carbon Monoxide
- Cleaning products like furniture polish or dusting sprays
- Personal car products like hair spray or perfume
- Flu, colds

ALLERGIES

Common signs of allergies include runny or stuffy noses, coughing, hives, itching, a rash, or puffy eyes. Allergies can be deadly for some people. When sensitive people come in contact with something they're very allergic to, like peanuts, their blood pressure drops, their breathing tubes swell up, and they can die from lack of air. The good news is that allergies can be treated. If you have allergies, it's important to find out what causes them and how to take care of them. A doctor can test you to find out. People with severe allergies may need to carry emergency medicine.

Common Allergens

An *allergen* is something that causes allergy signs, or an allergic reaction. Many of the asthma triggers listed above also cause allergic reactions in people who don't have asthma. There are many other allergens, too. Some common ones are listed here. It is important to talk to your doctor if you have had a reaction to any of these:

Foods: milk and dairy products, citrus fruit like oranges and lemons, artificial colors and flavors, nuts, and shellfish like shrimp or clams.

Medicines: penicillin, some heart medicines, and some anti-seizure medicines.

Insect stings and bites: yellow jackets, honeybees, paper wasps, hornets, and fire ants cause most stings. In some people, reactions to stings become more serious as years go by. Eventually, only one sting may kill. Talk to your doctor if you have had a serious reaction to a sting.

Contact allergens: cause reactions when things like plants, cosmetics, jewelry, or latex (a type of rubber) touch the skin. Rashes are common reactions to these allergens.

Look at the questions on the following pages to help you find problems around your home that may make asthma and allergies worse.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

- ✓ Does anyone in your family have asthma or allergies?
- ✓ Does someone in your family notice burning eyes, coughing, or sneezing that happens most often at home?
- ✓ Does your home have carpet that is not cleaned well or not cleaned often?
- ✓ Do you have carpeting, stuffed toys, or fleecy materials in bedrooms?
- ✓ Do you store food in containers or boxes that don't have covers?
- ✓ Do you keep pets inside?
- ✓ Has it been more than a year since you had your furnace, flues, and chimneys inspected and cleaned?
- ✓ Does anyone smoke inside your home?
- ✓ Is your home damp or musty?

ACTION STEPS

Pay Attention to your Asthma and Allergies

Know what triggers your or your children's asthma or allergies. Talk to a doctor or nurse about keeping emergency medicine around if your asthma or allergies are severe. If someone you love takes asthma or allergy medication make sure they know when to take it.

Healthy Housekeeping

Clean your home often. Since cleaning puts dust into the air, have someone without asthma or allergies do it. Wear a dust mask if you can't find somebody else to clean. You can buy one at a drug store.

Keep clutter down. Clutter collects dust and makes it harder to keep a clean home. Store your belongings in plastic or cardboard boxes instead of keeping them in piles or stacks. You can move the boxes to make cleaning easier.

When possible, don't have carpeting or rugs. Hard floors (vinyl, wood, or tile) are much easier to keep dust-free. If you do have rugs or carpet, vacuum often. You may be able to borrow or buy a vacuum with a special HEPA (High Efficiency Particle Air) filter to get rid of dust. Call your local or state health department for more information.

Keep Down Dust Mites

Use zippered plastic mattress and pillow covers beneath sheets and pillowcases. You can buy them at your local department store or through the mail. If the mattress cover is uncomfortable, put a mattress pad over it.

Wash bedding, including blankets, pillow covers, and mattress pads in hot water every week. Temperatures above 130° kill dust mites.

Control Other Pests

Roaches and rodents can trigger asthma and allergies. They need food, water, warmth, and shelter to survive. You can control roaches, mice, and other pests by making these things hard to get. Here are some tips to keep pests away:

- Store food in tightly sealed containers.
- Clean up crumbs and spills right away.
- Empty your garbage often.
- Wash your dirty dishes right after eating.
- Don't leave out pet food or water overnight.
- Fix plumbing leaks and drips.
- Seal cracks where roaches and other bugs hide or get into your home.

Pets

Furry pets like dogs, cats, and gerbils can cause asthma and allergy attacks because of their saliva and skin flakes. If you do have pets, make sure to keep them out of sleeping areas and off fabric-covered furniture.

Check Your Appliances

Make sure your gas appliances, fireplace, furnace, or wood-burning stove have yearly checkups to keep down soot (and protect you from the dangers of carbon monoxide).

Check the filter on your furnace or air conditioner a couple times each year. Change when needed. Think about buying filters that cost a little more than the most economical ones. They will clean the air in your home better. They trap more dust so you will need to change them more often. You can buy air filters at a hardware store. Check labels and packaging to find out about these products. If you rent, talk to your landlord about these steps.

Smoking

Cigarette, cigar, or pipe smoke causes health problems, especially for people with asthma. It is best to quit smoking (contact the American Lung Association at 1-800-LUNG –USA for help).

Otherwise, smoke outside and away from children. Don't light up in your car, because smoke will linger there and affect children.

Mold

When people breathe in mold, it can cause allergies and asthma to act up. Mold needs water to grow. Keep your home dry to control mold. That will also help with roaches and dust mites. See the chapter on mold on page 17 for more information.

Air cleaners may help in the bedrooms of allergy and asthma patients. Good air cleaners (with HEPA filters) cost about \$100 or so. DO NOT use an air cleaner that makes ozone because ozone can cause health problems.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Your local county Extension Office—look in your telephone book.
- Your local or state health department—look in your telephone book.
- American Lung Association 800/LUNG-USA—www.lungusa.org
- The Soap and Detergent Association, Cleaning to Control Allergies and Asthma, 202/347-2900—www.cleaning101.com/house
- Healthy Indoor Air for America's Homes 406/994-3451—www.montana.edu/wwwcxair
- The Allergy & Asthma Network: Mothers of Asthmatics 88/878-4403—www.aanma.org
- The Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network (FAAN) 800/929-4040—www.foodallergy.org

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