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Asthma in Adults: What You Need to Know

Asthma is a chronic condition that can develop in adulthood, even if you've never had breathing issues before. About 8% of the adult population – nearly 20 million Americans – are affected, many with no prior history of the disease. If left untreated, asthma can make daily activities more difficult and lead to severe breathing problems.

If you are experiencing persistent coughing, breathlessness, or chest tightness, an allergist can help you decide whether asthma is the cause and create a personalized treatment plan to keep your symptoms under control.

What causes asthma in adults?

Asthma can develop at any age, even if you've never had breathing problems. Asthma happens when the airways in your lungs become swollen and narrow, making it hard to breathe. Doctors don't always know why some people get asthma, but here are common causes:



- **Allergies:** Pollen, dust mites, mold, and pet dander can irritate your lungs and trigger asthma.

- **Respiratory Infections:** Colds, flu, and lung infections can damage your airways and lead to asthma.
- **Smoking or Secondhand Smoke:** Breathing in smoke from cigarettes or other sources can make your lungs inflamed and more sensitive.
- **Air Pollution & Chemicals:** Dirty air, strong smells, and chemicals from cleaning products or jobs like construction can trigger asthma.
- **Genetics (Family History):** If your parents or siblings have asthma, you may also be more likely to get it.
- **Stress & Strong Emotions:** Feeling incredibly stressed, anxious, or even laughing too hard can make it harder to breathe if you have asthma.
- **Exercise-Induced Asthma:** Some people only have asthma symptoms when they exercise, especially in cold or dry air.
- **Hormonal Changes:** Some women develop asthma due to hormonal shifts, like during pregnancy or menopause.

If you have asthma, knowing what triggers it can help you stay in control and breathe easier!



Symptoms not to ignore

Asthma symptoms in adults can develop slowly, making them easy to overlook. Many people dismiss them, attributing them to stress, allergies, or poor fitness, and go years before receiving a diagnosis.

How to Recognize an Asthma Attack & Why It's Important

An asthma attack happens when your airways suddenly get tighter, making it hard to breathe. Knowing the signs early can help you get the proper treatment quickly and prevent a life-threatening emergency.

SIGNS OF AN ASTHMA ATTACK

Mild to Moderate Symptoms:

- Coughing a lot
- Wheezing (a whistling sound when you breathe)
- Feeling short of breath
- Tightness or pressure in your chest
- Trouble sleeping because of coughing or breathing issues

Severe Symptoms – Get Help Immediately!

- Extremely hard to breathe, even when resting
- Using extra muscles in your neck or ribs to breathe
- Speaking in short words because breathing is difficult
- Lips or fingernails turn blue.
- Rescue inhaler (albuterol) isn't helping

Why It's Important to Act Fast

An asthma attack can get worse quickly, so prompt treatment can prevent a trip to the emergency room. If an attack is not treated, the airways can close completely, making it impossible to breathe. If left untreated, asthma can worsen over time and increase the risk of serious complications—including emergency room visits, hospitalizations, and asthma-related deaths.



What to Do:

- Use your quick-relief inhaler (rescue inhaler) right away
- Sit up straight and stay calm
- If breathing doesn't improve after 15 minutes, call 911
- Do not use over-the-counter asthma inhaler Primatene Mist (inhaled epinephrine) if you have alternatives as it can worsen asthma symptoms over time with overuse.

Tip: Always carry your inhaler and follow your personal Asthma Action Plan from your doctor.

Diagnosing Asthma in Adults

Asthma is often misdiagnosed in adults. Asthma symptoms can develop slowly, making them easy to overlook. Many people dismiss symptoms, attributing them to stress, allergies, or poor fitness, and can go years without receiving a diagnosis.

Emergency department visits for shortness of breath in adults can be misdiagnosed as anxiety or heart conditions rather than asthma and can often occur due to the overlapping symptoms of these conditions, leading to delayed or incorrect treatment and potentially unnecessary hospital visits. Asthma also overlaps with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), yet each has its own distinct symptoms.

Allergists (asthma specialists) can provide a more accurate diagnosis. Expect an allergist to:

- Review your medical history and symptoms.
- Perform lung function tests like spirometry to assess airflow. (Despite its importance, fewer than half of patients diagnosed with asthma reportedly receive lung function testing)



- Conduct allergy testing to figure out if allergens are contributing to your symptoms.



With access to specialized testing and expertise, allergists are equipped to distinguish asthma from other conditions—ensuring you receive the right treatment.

Treatment Options for Asthma

While asthma cannot be cured, treatment focuses on working with an allergist to control symptoms, prevent flare-ups, and improve overall lung function.

AVOIDING TRIGGERS

Avoiding triggers is a key step in asthma management. Common triggers include:

- Exercise, especially in cold or dry air
- Weather changes (e.g., cold air, humidity, thunderstorms)
- Medications (e.g., aspirin, NSAIDs, and beta-blockers)
- Stress and anxiety, which can trigger asthma symptoms

An allergist can help you figure out your specific triggers and provide guidance on minimizing exposure.

ASTHMA MEDICATIONS

Quick-relief medications

Quick-relief (rescue) inhalers are used for sudden symptom relief and work quickly to relax airway muscles during an asthma attack. These include:

- **Short-acting beta-agonists (SABAs):** albuterol (ProAir HFA, Ventolin HFA)

- **Airsupra (albuterol/ budesonide):** this medication is a combination of an inhaled corticosteroid (ICS) and a short-acting beta-agonist.
- **Budesonide/formoterol or mometasone/formoterol:** taken for relief of asthma symptoms in mild asthma and taken daily for both maintenance and relief in moderate to severe asthma

Note: If you need your quick-relief inhaler more than twice a week, your asthma may not be well controlled.

Long-term maintenance medications

These daily medications help prevent asthma symptoms and reduce the frequency of attacks:

- **Inhaled corticosteroids (ICS):** These can be used alone or in combination with other drugs. These medications are the most effective long-term treatment for asthma, reducing exacerbations and improving lung function. Examples include fluticasone, budesonide, and beclomethasone.
- **Budesonide/formoterol, mometasone/formoterol (SMART/MART Therapy-Single Maintenance and Reliever Therapy)** SMART/MART therapy refers to a treatment approach that uses a combination inhaler with inhaled steroid and bronchodilator taken daily for maintenance therapy and for rapid relief of asthma symptoms when needed. This is the preferred method based on national and international asthma guidelines.
- **Long-acting beta-agonists (LABAs):** Used in combination with ICS, LABAs may reduce



the risk of severe exacerbations. Examples include formoterol (SMART/MART) and salmeterol

- **Leukotriene modifiers:** These oral medications, such as montelukast, help reduce airway inflammation and prevent asthma symptoms.
- **Long-Acting Muscarinic Antagonists (LAMA):** medications used as an add-on in patients with moderate to severe asthma who are uncontrolled despite standard treatments.

Biologic therapies

Biologics are a special type of medicine used to help people with moderate to severe asthma that doesn't get better with regular inhalers. These medicines target the part of the immune system that causes asthma symptoms and can significantly reduce hospitalization and asthma attacks. They are not steroids. Biologics are not pills but are given as a shot (injection), usually once every 2 to 8 weeks. Most biologics can be taken at home, but some need to be given at a doctor's office. Examples of biologic medicines for asthma include:

With the guidance of an allergist, you can decide the most effective combination of treatments to manage your asthma and improve your quality of life.

To learn more about asthma management, visit acaai.org.

Find an allergist. Find relief.

The best way to take control of your allergies is to speak with an [allergist](#). They have specialized training and experience to perform and interpret allergy testing. Once you know what you're allergic to, your allergist can develop a treatment plan to reduce or eliminate your allergy symptoms.

When should I see an allergist?

See an allergist if you have any of these conditions. Allergists treat two of the nation's most common health problems – allergies and asthma. More than 50 million people in the United States have these allergic diseases. Although symptoms may not always be severe, allergies and asthma are serious and should be treated that way. Many people with these diseases don't realize how much better they can feel. Allergists also treat conditions with similar symptoms, such as non-allergic rhinitis.

What is an allergist?

An allergist is trained to find the source of your symptoms, treat it and help you feel healthy. Life's too short to struggle with allergies or asthma. An allergist can help you find the answers you're looking for.

After earning a medical degree, the doctor completes a three-year residency training program in either internal medicine or pediatrics. They then finish two or three more years of study in asthma, allergy and immunology. The best way to manage your allergies or asthma is to see an allergist.



- **Omalizumab (Xolair):** Targets IgE antibodies to reduce allergic inflammation.
- **Mepolizumab (Nucala):** Blocks interleukin-5 (IL-5), which affects eosinophils (a type of white blood cell involved in inflammation).
- **Reslizumab (Cinqair):** Also targets IL-5 to manage eosinophilic asthma (IV dosing).
- **Benralizumab (Fasenra):** Works on IL-5 receptors to reduce eosinophils.
- **Dupilumab (Dupixent):** Blocks IL-4 and IL-13 pathways, proteins that are involved in allergic inflammation.
- **Tezepelumab (Tezspire):** Blocks TSLP, a protein that triggers airway inflammation.

Allergy immunotherapy (allergy shots or tablets)

If allergies contribute to asthma symptoms, allergy shots or sublingual tablets can help desensitize your immune system to allergens over time, reducing symptom severity.