

# Asthma Basics

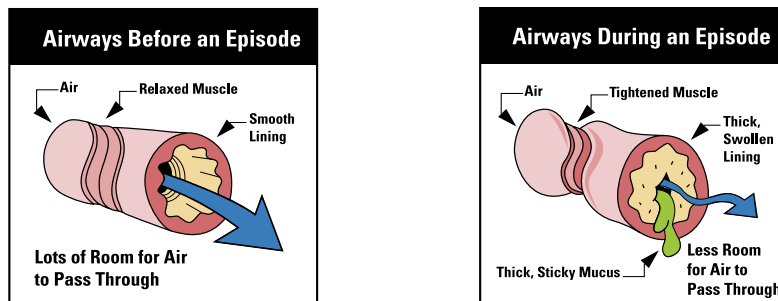
## WHAT IS ASTHMA?

**Asthma is a very common lung condition.** Most of the time, children who have asthma feel okay. But during an asthma episode (also known as an “attack”), it becomes harder to breathe.

Three things happen in the airways of the lungs during an asthma episode:

- The airways get swollen. Doctors call this inflammation. People with asthma always have a little inflammation, even when they’re not having an episode.
- Thick, sticky mucus fills up the airways
- The muscles that wrap around the airways squeeze tight

These three things may cause coughing, a tight feeling in the chest, shortness of breath and/or wheezing. Wheezing is the sound caused by trying to breathe through narrowed airways.



**Asthma is chronic, which means it can last a lifetime. Many children’s asthma problems get better as they get older. Although there is no cure for asthma, it can be CONTROLLED.**

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## EARLY WARNING SIGNS

Most asthma episodes start slowly, and you may notice small changes in your child beforehand. These changes are called early warning signs. You can often stop an episode or make it less severe if you start treatment when you see early warning signs. Talk with the doctor about what you should do when your child has early warning signs. Some common early warning signs are:

- Mild coughing
- Itchy or sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Itchy or watery eyes
- Headache
- Tiredness or irritability
- Peak flow meter reading in the yellow zone

## WHAT CAUSES ASTHMA EPISODES?

Asthma episodes (attacks) usually start when the airways are bothered by something. These things are called “**triggers.**” Every child’s triggers are different. Some common triggers and tips for avoiding them are:

- **Smoke** from cigarettes, pipes, cigars, grills, fireplaces and burning wood. Don’t allow anyone to smoke near your child, in your house or in your car.
- **Colds, flu, sinus and ear infections.** Make sure your child gets a yearly flu shot. Good handwashing is also helpful to prevent colds and infections.
- **Strong odors** from sprays, perfumes, cleaning products and other things. Do not spray these when your child is in the room.
- **Air pollution.** Spend less time outside when the smog level is high.
- **Exercise or sports.** Your child may need to take asthma medicine before being active. Because physical activity is important, talk to your doctor about how to help your child be active while avoiding asthma episodes.
- **Allergens** such as dust, pollen, mold, insect droppings and animals with fur or feathers. Keep your home clean and free of pests. Your child may or may not have allergies. Talk to the doctor about this.
- **Strong Emotions**, like crying, laughing, anger or excitement. Your child can’t avoid these emotions, but be aware that they can trigger an asthma episode.
- **Weather changes**, like rainy weather and very cold, dry air. Have your child wear a scarf over his mouth and nose on cold, dry days.

## USING A METERED DOSE INHALER

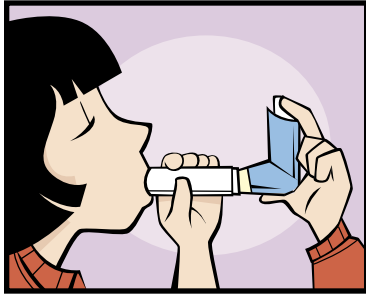
Many asthma medicines are given by metered dose inhalers, which can be hard to use. Your doctor should show you and your child how to use the metered dose inhaler the right way. It is very important that the inhaler is used the right way:

- So your child’s medicine can work
- For the medicine to get to the lungs, where it helps open the airways

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## HOW TO USE A METERED DOSE INHALER

1. Take off the cap. Shake the inhaler.
2. Stand up. Breathe out.
3. Use the inhaler in one of these ways:

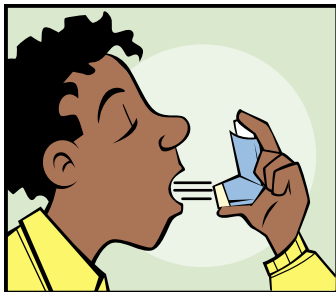


### A. Spacer/Holding Chamber

This is preferred. It helps the most medicine reach the lungs where it is needed to work.

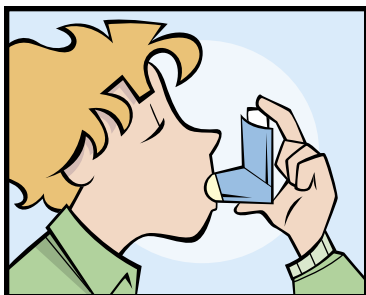
### B. Open Mouth

Inhaler is held 1-2 inches in front of mouth (about the width of two fingers).



### C. In the Mouth

A. and B. are best. If your child has trouble with these, your doctor may have your child use C.



4. As your child starts to breathe in, he should push down on the top of the inhaler and keep breathing in slowly for three to five seconds.
5. Have your child hold his breath for five to 10 seconds, and then breathe out.

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## HOW DO I TELL WHEN MY CHILD IS HAVING TROUBLE BREATHING?

If your child has one or more of these symptoms, prompt action is needed.

- Coughing or wheezing
- Trouble breathing
- Chest tightness
- Less playful or hard to wake up
- Trouble catching his breath. An older child may sit hunched over or be unable to speak a full sentence without stopping to take a breath. A baby may have a softer cry than usual and may not be able to suck on a pacifier or bottle well.
- The skin between his ribs and around his collarbones pulls in every time he breathes
- Breathing at a faster rate than normal. To find out if your child has a normal breathing rate, count when he is calm or sleeping.
- Normal breathing rates are:
  - **Birth to 1 year:** 30-40 breaths per minute
  - **1 to 8 years:** 24-30 breaths per minute
  - **9 years and older:** 16-24 breaths per minute
- Peak flow meter reading is in the red zone (The doctor may want your child to use this device. If so, he will teach you and your child how to use it.)
- A blue or pale gray color to the lips, gums or fingernails.  
**THIS IS A DANGER SIGN! GET EMERGENCY HELP AT ONCE!**

**If you notice any of the above symptoms, it means your child is having an asthma episode. Follow your asthma action plan, talk to your child's doctor, get emergency help or call 911.**

### TAKE AWAY TIPS

- **Ask your child's doctor** for a written asthma management/emergency plan.
- **Share the plan** with your child's school, childcare center, and others who may care for your child.
- **Try to reduce your child's exposure** to asthma triggers.
- **Don't panic** during an asthma episode. Remain calm, reassure your child, and **follow the asthma plan.**
- **Take a class** to learn more about asthma management.
- Ensure that your child always has quick, **EASY ACCESS TO HIS ASTHMA MEDICINE** at home, at school and at all times. Make sure the inhaler has medicine. Replace as needed.

Learning how to help prevent and treat asthma episodes can help your child:

- Think of himself as healthy rather than sick
- Take part in school, play and physical activities

For additional and general information, visit these web sites:

[www.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov)

[www.aanma.org](http://www.aanma.org)

[www.schoolasthmaallergy.com](http://www.schoolasthmaallergy.com)

[www.aafa.org](http://www.aafa.org)

[www.asthmaandschools.org](http://www.asthmaandschools.org)

[www.lungusa.org](http://www.lungusa.org)

**CVS/pharmacy**

*In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room right away. This is general information and is not specific medical advice for your child. Always consult your child's doctor or other healthcare provider if you have any questions or concerns about the care or health of your child. A Children's Healthcare of Atlanta pediatric advice nurse is available 24 hours a day at 404.250.kids.*