

Asthma

What to discuss with your family doctor or nurse practitioner to help you receive high-quality care



Ontario Health is committed to helping patients, health care providers, and organizations improve the quality of health care in Ontario.

To do that, Ontario Health, through its Quality business unit, develops quality standards that set out important steps to treat conditions like asthma.

These standards are based on current evidence and input from an expert committee that includes patients, health care professionals, and researchers.

If you're interested in learning more about the quality standard on asthma, see page 14 of this guide. It has a summary of the top six areas to improve care for people 16 years of age and older with asthma. You can also download the complete [quality standard here](#).



If you suddenly have trouble breathing,
you could be having an asthma attack

- Take your “rescue” or “reliever” medication right away
- Follow your action plan, if you have one
- Call **911** or go to the nearest emergency department if you need help right away



What is asthma?

Asthma is a common but serious disease. When you have asthma, swelling in the airways in your lungs makes it hard to breathe. Your chest can feel tight, and you might wheeze, cough up mucus, or have a cough that doesn't go away.

If asthma isn't diagnosed and controlled, symptoms can get worse and lead to emergency department visits, time in the hospital, or in some cases, death. There's no cure, but with the right treatment, you can have a healthy life without symptoms.

Use this guide to start conversations with your family doctor or nurse practitioner. It doesn't tell you everything you need to know about asthma, but it can point you toward the right care. It includes questions on these topics:

- Do I have asthma?
- Asthma symptoms and triggers
- Asthma medication
- Asthma symptom control
- Living well with asthma

If you don't have time to read the whole guide, use this checklist when you talk with your family doctor or nurse practitioner. The more you talk with them, the more help you can get managing your asthma.



What causes asthma?

It's not clear what causes asthma, but it can be related to:

- A family history of asthma
- Having other conditions (like eczema or allergies)
- Breathing in chemicals, dust, or fumes at work that irritate your lungs

About 2 million people in Ontario live with asthma.



Do I have asthma?

If you have trouble breathing, are wheezing, are coughing, or feel tightness in your chest, these could be signs of asthma (see box below). Your symptoms may last a long time, or they may come and go.

Asthma symptoms are different for everyone, and putting all the pieces together can take time. But having a diagnosis is important: with one, you'll get the right treatment and help prevent serious health problems.

How can I get a diagnosis?

A test called spirometry, which measures how much air you breathe out, is an important part of your diagnosis. It's also called a lung function test or a pulmonary function test.

While you wait for results and a diagnosis, your family doctor or nurse practitioner might give you medication for your symptoms.

I felt like I was just getting old before my time. It was because I have asthma. To me, [getting a diagnosis] made all the difference in the world. It's good when you find out there really is something.



PERSON WITH ASTHMA



Watch for symptoms that:

- Come in groups (like shortness of breath, chest tightness, wheezing, or a cough)
- Are worse at night or in the early morning
- Happen twice a week or more
- Don't follow a regular pattern
- Are triggered by colds, allergies, cold air, hot and humid air, exercise, or chemicals such as smoke or fumes that affect your lungs

Write down your symptoms as they show up and change. This can help your family doctor or nurse practitioner to diagnose asthma.

Ask your family doctor or nurse practitioner:

- Do I need a breathing test to find out if I have asthma?
- How long will I wait for testing? How long will the results take?
- Is there any medication for my symptoms while I wait for testing? If I'm already taking asthma medication, will it affect my test results?
- Can I keep up my normal activities and exercise?
- Where can I get asthma education (for example, from a certified asthma educator) in my area?

Tell your family doctor or nurse practitioner:

- When and how often you have shortness of breath, chest tightness, wheezing, or a cough
- How you respond to asthma medications when you are having symptoms



Learn more

- [Understanding Asthma](#): Asthma Canada shares an overview of asthma, what to expect when you have it, and information on diagnosis and treatment
- [Asthma](#): The Canadian Lung Association offers more information on asthma symptoms and treatments, and how to manage an asthma attack



Asthma symptoms and triggers

It can take some trial and error to figure out what causes your asthma symptoms. Allergy tests can help pinpoint triggers like pet dander, but for the most part, there's no test for common asthma triggers. You can identify them by tracking what makes your asthma symptoms worse. Once you understand your triggers, it can help you to avoid them as much as possible.

Different things can make asthma symptoms worse, including:

- An illness, like a cold
- Allergies
- Smoke
- Cold air
- Hot and humid air
- Thunderstorms
- Air pollution
- Perfumes/scents
- Household chemicals
- Contact with fumes or other substances at work

You can use an asthma diary to help track your triggers and symptoms (ask your family doctor or nurse practitioner or check out resources from the [Lung Health Foundation](#)). This can also help you compare how you feel over time. The more your family doctor or nurse practitioner knows about your symptoms and triggers, the easier it will be to prescribe the right medication and dose. They might give you a small device called a **peak flow meter** to help you track how well you're breathing.

Ask your family doctor or nurse practitioner:

- How do I identify my triggers? How can I avoid my triggers?
- What community services can help me limit or avoid my triggers?
- What should I do if my symptoms get worse and I have an asthma attack?

Tell your family doctor or nurse practitioner:

- About the things that trigger your symptoms at home, at work, outside, or in other places
- If symptoms are worse at a certain time of day or during certain activities



Asthma medication

Medication plays a big part in controlling your asthma and your symptoms. Treatment isn't "one size fits all"—it will match your symptoms and test results. With the right medication and dose, you shouldn't have symptoms.

Your family doctor or nurse practitioner will usually prescribe two types of inhalers, or "puffers." They will explain how and when to use them, and any side effects to watch for.

Inhalers (or "puffers")

- A "controller" or "preventer" puffer prevents symptoms by bringing down the swelling in the airways in the lungs. Your doctor or nurse practitioner might recommend that you use this regularly, even when you don't have symptoms
- A "rescue" or "reliever" puffer relieves symptoms quickly by opening the airways

Spacers

A spacer is a long tube that attaches to the puffer to make it easier to breathe in the medication. Depending on the puffers prescribed, you might need a spacer.

When you fill your prescription, the pharmacist will teach you how to use the puffers, a spacer, or other medications in your asthma action plan (see box on page 9). They will also answer questions about your medications.

Make sure that you take your medications as prescribed, even if you don't have symptoms. If you're taking your **controller (preventer)** puffers and still have symptoms that affect your daily activities, like your ability to work or exercise, talk with your family doctor or nurse practitioner. You might need a different dose or a different medication.

Ask your family doctor or nurse practitioner:

- What should I do when I have an asthma attack?
- What kind of puffers do I need? What are their side effects?
- How often should I take my puffers?
- How much will my medication cost? Are there lower-cost alternatives?
- How often should we update my asthma action plan?

Tell your family doctor or nurse practitioner:

- If you've taken asthma medication before
- About any medication you take for other conditions



Your asthma action plan

You, your caregivers, and your family doctor or nurse practitioner will work together to write a personal asthma action plan.

This is a plan that lists your medications and explains how and when to take them. Your doctor or nurse practitioner will explain how to use the plan and give you a copy.

The asthma action plan should explain what to do:

- To control your asthma
- If your asthma is getting worse
- If you're having an asthma emergency

Using your asthma action plan will help you stay healthy.



Learn more

If you're worried about medication costs, these programs could help:

- [The Trillium Drug Program](#): If your drug costs take up more than 4% of your yearly income, you might qualify for drug coverage through this provincial program
- [The Ontario Drug Benefit Program](#): If you are 65 years of age or older, live in a long-term care facility, or need other supports, you might qualify for coverage for many common and specialized drugs



Asthma symptom control

Talk with your doctor or nurse practitioner about your symptoms on a regular basis to make sure that your medication and asthma action plan are right for you. At each visit, they will ask you about your asthma symptoms, what makes them worse, and how you respond to medication between appointments.

If you take your **controller (preventer)** puffer as prescribed and still have symptoms that get in the way of your daily activities, then your asthma isn't controlled. Every time you see your family doctor or nurse practitioner, tell them if you have any of these signs that your asthma is not controlled:

- You have symptoms during the day more than three times a week
- You have symptoms at night once a week or more
- You need your **rescue (reliever)** puffer more than three times a week
- You can't participate in physical activity because of your asthma
- You've missed work because of your asthma
- Your symptoms have gotten worse and you needed new medication or had to go to the hospital

Your family doctor or nurse practitioner might refer you to an asthma or allergy specialist if your asthma is hard to control.



If you had to go to the hospital...

If you visited the hospital because of an asthma attack, your family doctor or nurse practitioner should see you a few days later to make sure you're feeling better.

Ask your family doctor or nurse practitioner:

- What will we do if my asthma is not controlled with my current medication? For example, do I need different medication? Or do I need specialized asthma care from an asthma or allergy specialist?



If you need support managing your asthma:

- [The Lung Health Foundation's helpline](#): 1-888-344-5864
- [Asthma Canada's Asthma & Allergy HelpLine](#): 1-888-787-4050
- The [Asthma Canada Member Alliance](#) provides a safe peer support community that you can access anytime, anywhere
- The [Mental Health helpline](#): 1-866-531-2600 (If you need help managing mental and emotional well-being)



Living well with asthma

Managing asthma can feel like a full-time job. Watching for triggers and dealing with your symptoms can be challenging, especially when they affect social or work activities. At times, it might feel like too much: it can affect your mood and even make you avoid activities you usually enjoy.

But asthma doesn't have to affect your day-to-day life if you:

- Use your medication
- Stay active
- Limit or avoid triggers
- Get your yearly flu shot
- Get your pneumonia vaccine
- **Get help for you or family members to cut back or quit smoking or vaping (cannabis, nicotine/tobacco, or other substances) to keep your home smoke-free**

Others can help you live well with asthma, too. You might want to talk with family, friends, and people at your work or school about how they can support you.

Ask your family doctor or nurse practitioner:

- What can I say to help my family, friends, and coworkers understand my asthma?
- Is there anything else I can do to stay healthy while living with asthma?
- Where can I or family members get support to quit smoking or vaping?
- Managing asthma is overwhelming. Where can I get help or mental health support?



If you're a caregiver...

You might have your own questions. It can help to identify yourself as the patient's caregiver to their family doctor or nurse practitioner. This will make sure they know and respect your concerns.

- Let them know what your role will be in helping the patient manage their asthma
- Let them know if you need help



For your reference: the quality standard in brief

This patient guide accompanies the quality standard on asthma care in the community.

Below is a summary of the top six areas to improve care for people 16 years of age and older with asthma. To read more, you can download the [quality standard here](#).

Quality Statement 1: Diagnosis

Adults clinically suspected of having asthma complete spirometry to demonstrate reversible airflow obstruction and, if negative, other lung function testing to confirm the diagnosis of asthma as soon as possible.

Quality Statement 2: Asthma Control

Adults with asthma have a structured assessment at least annually to determine their level of asthma control and reasons for poor control.

Quality Statement 3: Asthma Medication

Adults with asthma receive appropriate medication and devices based on their current level of asthma control, including early initiation of inhaled anti-inflammatory therapy.

Quality Statement 4: Self-Management Education and Asthma Action Plan

Adults with asthma and their caregivers receive self-management education and a written personalized asthma action plan that is reviewed regularly with a health care professional.

Quality Statement 5: Referral to Specialized Asthma Care

Adults who meet criteria for severe asthma or have other appropriate indications are referred to specialized asthma care.

Quality Statement 6: Follow-Up After Discharge

Adults who have had an emergency department visit or been hospitalized for an asthma exacerbation have a follow-up assessment within 2 to 7 days after discharge.

What's next?

Remember, everybody is different.

The support you need and the care plan you develop with your health care professional will be unique to you.

This conversation guide is only a starting point.

You may have other topics you want to cover with your health care professional. It's important to speak with them about any other questions or concerns.

Need more information?

If you have any questions or feedback about this guide, please contact us at qualitystandards@hqontario.ca or 1-866-623-6868.

For more reading on asthma, read the quality standard at hqontario.ca/qualitystandards.