

Thank you for reviewing our draft patient guide. We greatly appreciate your time and insights.

Once we collect all feedback, our writers and designer will edit the guide based on what we hear. This can include making it shorter and easier to read. To see an example of a final guide, please see our recent patient guide for [Low Back Pain](#). (Note: All guides may look different.)

When you're finished reading the draft patient guide, please fill out [this survey](#) by **August 8, 2019**.

IMAGE TBD

# Asthma

What to discuss with your health care professional to help you receive high-quality care

## What is asthma?

Asthma is a common disease that affects the lungs. When you have asthma, swelling and tightness in the airways in your lungs makes it hard to breathe and often causes other symptoms: your chest might feel tight and you might wheeze, cough up mucus, or have a cough that doesn't go away.

Asthma is a serious disease. If it isn't diagnosed and controlled, symptoms can get worse and lead to emergency department visits, time in the hospital, or in some cases, death.

Talk to your health care professional about:

- Whether you might have asthma
- Asthma medication
- Tracking symptoms and triggers
- Living well with asthma

### What causes asthma?

A family history of asthma, air pollution or exposure to smoke can all play a role in asthma, but the exact cause isn't clear.

These discussions will help your health care professional make the right treatment recommendations. And understanding your asthma can help you confidently control it and improve your quality of life.

### Did you know?

- More than 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). Your symptoms may last a long time, or come and go. You will need a breathing test to confirm your diagnosis and to get the right treatment. The first breathing test people usually get is called “spirometry.” It measures how much air you breathe out. Your health care professional might call it a lung function test or a pulmonary function test.

Asthma symptoms are different for everyone, and putting all the pieces together can take time. While you wait for results and a diagnosis, your health care professional might give you medication for your symptoms.

### Ask your health care professional:

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Do I need a breathing test? How long will I have to wait for it?

If I’m already taking asthma medication, will it affect my test results?

Will I need specialized asthma care?

### Watch for symptoms that:

- Come in batches (like shortness of breath, chest tightness, wheezing, or a cough)
- Are worse at night or in the early morning
- Happen often (twice a week or more)
- Vary in how bad they are
- Are triggered by things like cold air, medications, exercise, or smoke

*“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 it really is something.”*

PERSON WITH ASTHMA

## Talking about: asthma medication

Your health care professional should explain how asthma may affect you and how the right medication will help your symptoms. You, your caregivers, and your health care professional should work together to write a personal asthma action plan.

Medication isn't "one size fits all" for asthma—your medication and dose will match your symptoms and test results. Although asthma is a lifelong condition, the medication can help you live symptom free.

### Your asthma action plan

An [asthma action plan](#) is a written plan that lists your medications and explains how to take them. It can include advice on how to stay healthy.

Asthma action plans help you understand your asthma symptoms, and they use colour coding, so you'll know what to do if:

- Your asthma is well controlled
- Your asthma is getting worse, or
- You're having an asthma emergency

Your health care professional will probably prescribe an inhaler, or "puffer." There are two types of puffers:

- A "controller" puffer brings down the swelling in the airways in the lungs
- A "rescue" puffer relieves symptoms quickly by opening the airways

It's important to understand how to use both types of puffers and any other medication that's part of your asthma action plan.

If you're already on medication and still having symptoms, talk to your health care professional to see if you need a different dose or a different medication.

### If you need immediate help:

- Call 911 or Telehealth Ontario (1-866-797-0000)
- Go to the nearest hospital emergency department

### Ask your health care professional:

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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 health care professional:

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If you've taken asthma medication before

About any medication you take for other conditions

## 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 annual income, you might qualify for drug coverage through this provincial program
- [The Ontario Drug Benefit Program](#): If you are over 65 years old, are living in a long-term care facility, or need other supports, you might qualify for coverage for many common and specialized drugs

## Talking about: tracking symptoms and triggers

Even though your health care professional will support your care, you'll play the biggest part in managing your asthma. Paying close attention to your symptoms, what makes them worse, and how you react to medication will go a long way in controlling your asthma day to day.

### Symptoms

Knowing how often you use your controller and rescue puffers will help your health care professional make sure that the medication and dose are the right ones for you.

At your appointments, tell them how often these events have happened in the past four weeks:

- You had symptoms during the day and at night
- You needed your “rescue” puffer each week
- You were unable to participate in physical activity because of your asthma
- You missed work because of your asthma
- Your symptoms got worse and you needed new medication or had to go to the hospital

There's a [diary here](#) that you can download. It can help you keep track of your symptoms and what makes them better or worse.



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## Triggers

Things like perfume, cold temperatures, smoke, and air pollution can make asthma worse. It can take a bit of trial and error to figure out exactly what causes your symptoms to suddenly get worse (flare up). Allergy tests can be another way to help pinpoint specific triggers like pet dander. Once you start to understand your triggers, you can discuss them with your health care professional and get help to avoid them as much as possible.

### Ask your health care professional:

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How do I identify triggers? How can I avoid my triggers?

What should I do if my symptoms get worse?

### Tell your health care professional:

.....

About the things that trigger your symptoms at home, outside, or in other places

### If you need more help managing your asthma:

- [The Ontario Lung Association: Lung Healthline: 1-888-344-5864](#)
- [Asthma Canada: Asthma Helpline: 1-888-787-4050](#)

## Talking about: living well with asthma

Managing asthma can feel like a full-time job. Watching for triggers or explaining them to friends, family, or co-workers can be challenging. And dealing with your symptoms can be stressful, especially in public places like your workplace or restaurants or when they affect social activities. At times, it might feel like too much and might affect your mood. It might even make you stay away from things you'd usually enjoy.

But it's possible to get things under control so that asthma doesn't get in the way of the life you want to live.

Keep in mind that others can help you live well with asthma, too. You might want to talk with friends and people at your workplace or school about how they can support you.

### Ask your health care professional:

.....  
What can I say to help my family, friends, and coworkers understand my asthma?

What supports can help me with asthma's impact on my mental health?

### Learn more

The Canadian Mental Health Association's helpline can help you with some of the emotional aspects of managing asthma: 1-866-531-2600.

## If you're a caregiver...

You might have your own questions. And you may want to identify yourself as the patient's caregiver to their health care professional to make sure that they know and respect your concerns.

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

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## For your reference: the quality standard in brief

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

We know that not everyone across the province receives the right care, every time. So, to help address gaps in care, we produce quality standards that outline **what quality care looks like** for specific conditions and situations, such as asthma. Quality standards are based on current best evidence and input from patients, caregivers, and health care providers.

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

If you're interested in the quality standard, below is a summary. To read more, you can download it [here](#).

### Diagnosis

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

### What this means for you

If your symptoms include shortness of breath, a feeling of tightness in your chest, wheezing, or cough, your family doctor or nurse practitioner should make sure you have a breathing test before they diagnose you with asthma. They may offer you medication while you wait to have this test done.

## Asthma Control

**For clinicians:** Adults with asthma regularly have a structured assessment to determine their level of asthma control and any reasons for poor control.

### What this means for you

A health care professional should see you at least every 6 months to check on your asthma. If you have a severe flare up or you have a change in your medication, your health care professional may need to see you more often. At these appointments, they should ask you about:

- Your asthma symptoms and what makes them worse
- Your use of medications
- Anything else that might be affecting how you feel

You can help by keeping track of these details between appointments.

## Pharmacological Management

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

### What this means for you

Most adults with asthma can live symptom free by regularly using their controller puffer and by avoiding triggers as much as possible. Your family doctor or nurse practitioner should talk with you about your goals, beliefs, and concerns about asthma and medications so you can together develop a treatment plan that works for you. They should:

- Explain how and when to use your medications

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- Ask you to show them how you use your puffers to make sure you are confident using them

There are many different types of asthma medication. If your asthma symptoms continue on your current medications, talk with your family doctor or nurse practitioner about trying a different dose or a different asthma medication.

## Self-Management Education and Asthma Action Plan

**For clinicians:** 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.

### What this means for you

Your health care professional should explain asthma to you, including what you can do to take care of yourself. You, your caregivers (if you want them involved), and your health care professional should work together to write your personal asthma action plan. This plan describes:

- Your medications and how to take them
- Things you can do each day to stay healthy
- What to do if your symptoms flare up

## Referral to Specialized Asthma Care

**For clinicians:** Adults who meet criteria for severe asthma and/or have other appropriate indications are referred to specialized asthma care.

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### **What this means for you**

If you take your medication and avoid triggers as much as possible but continue to have asthma symptoms, or if your family doctor or nurse practitioner has other concerns, they should consult with or refer you to specialized asthma care.

## **Follow-up After Discharge**

**For clinicians:** 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 this means for you**

If you have gone to the emergency department or been hospitalized because of an asthma flare-up, your family doctor or nurse practitioner should follow up with you within 2 to 7 days of leaving hospital. They will check to see how you're doing and make any needed changes to your medications and your asthma action plan. At this visit, you can also ask questions to make sure you understand:

- What caused the flare-up
- What care you received
- What you can do to prevent asthma flare-ups

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## 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.

The questions in this patient guide are meant only as a starting point. You may have other topics you want to cover with your health care professional. It's important to speak to 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](mailto:qualitystandards@hqontario.ca) or 1-866-623-6868.

For more reading on asthma, read the quality standard at:

[hqontario.ca/qualitystandards](http://hqontario.ca/qualitystandards)

**For more information, please visit: [hqontario.ca](http://hqontario.ca)**

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