

# What is Asthma?

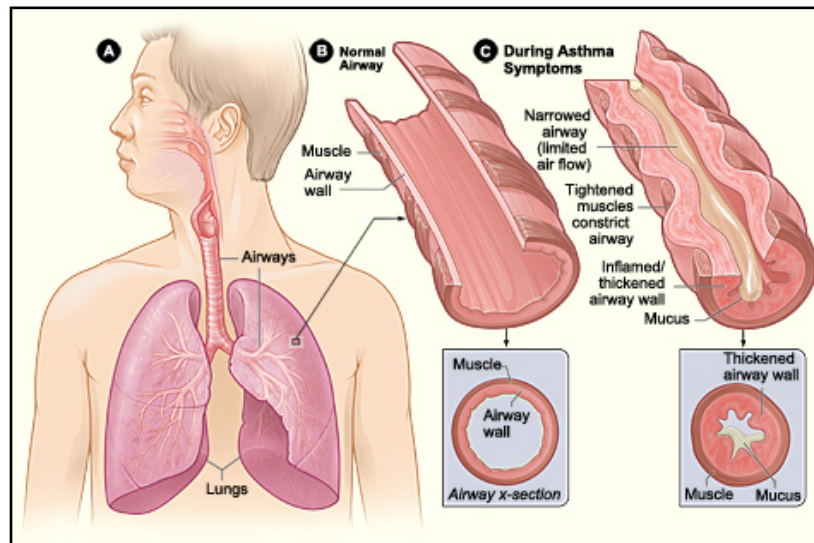
Asthma is a chronic disease of the airways (breathing tubes) in the lungs. This means that you have asthma even when you feel fine and that your asthma can flare up at any time.

Asthma affects the airways in these ways:

- Walls of the airways are more swollen. This is called inflammation.
- The airways are also extra sensitive, meaning that they react to certain things that you breathe in. Muscles around the airways can easily tighten and squeeze down.
- The airways make more thick and sticky mucus

All of these changes make the airways narrow, so it is hard for air to go in and out of your lungs. This can make it hard to breathe and cause other asthma symptoms like coughing and wheezing.

There is no cure for asthma, but there is a lot you can do to control your asthma so that you can live a normal, active life and sleep through the night without asthma problems.



This picture shows where the lungs are in the body. It also shows the differences between an airway not affected by asthma and an airway affected by asthma.

Adapted from the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute's Diseases and Conditions Index:

[http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/dci/Diseases/Asthma/Asthma\\_WhatIs.html](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/dci/Diseases/Asthma/Asthma_WhatIs.html)

## What causes asthma?

- The exact cause of asthma is not known. Genetics (what runs in your family) and environment (what is in the air you breathe) are both important.
- Many different things (called **triggers**) can make asthma worse:
  - Allergens – pollen, pets, cockroach, mold, dust mites
  - Irritants – smoke, perfumes, cleaning products
  - Colds, weather changes, exercise, emotions
- It is important to learn about your asthma triggers, since they can be different for different people. Knowing your triggers and how to avoid them can help keep you healthy.

## What are asthma symptoms?

Symptoms are **what you feel** in your body. Everybody is different, but here are some common asthma symptoms:

- Cough
- Shortness of breath
- Wheezing
- Chest tightness or chest pain

You might have just some or all of these symptoms at times. They might not bother you much or they might feel very bad if your asthma is flaring up.

## What can you do to control your asthma and prevent symptoms?

1. Follow your Asthma Action Plan, even when you are feeling well.
2. Try to stay away from things that make your asthma worse.
3. Talk to your doctor if you have more symptoms than usual or need to use your quick-relief medicine more often.



## What should you do if you start to have problems with your asthma?

1. Look at your Asthma Action Plan to know what medicine to take and how much.
2. Take your quick-relief medicine as soon as you have symptoms. This can keep your symptoms from getting worse.
3. Call your doctor or get medical care if the medicine does not help.