

Asthma Glossary

Term	Definition
Action plan	A written set of directions or a chart that tells what to do if asthma symptoms occur, depending on their severity.
Acute	Severe symptoms which have a sudden beginning and last a brief time.
Adverse	An undesired side effect or toxicity caused by a drug.
Allergen	Any substance that causes a hypersensitivity reaction. Many allergens are responsible for triggering asthma , including dust mites, animal dander, mold, and cockroaches. Also called antigens.
Allergic asthma	A chronic, inflammatory disorder of the airways characterized by wheezing, breathing difficulties, coughing, and chest tightness where these symptoms are caused by an allergic reaction to an inhaled allergen, rather than an irritant or other non-allergy factor.
Allergic rhinitis	Allergic rhinitis is a collection of symptoms, mostly in the nose and eyes, which occur when one breathes in something they are allergic to, such as dust, dander, or pollen.
Allergist	A physician who specializes in diagnosing and treating allergies.
Allergy	An exaggerated response to a substance or condition produced by the release of histamine or histamine-like substances in affected cells.
Allergy shots	Treatment of an allergy by repeated injections of a diluted solution containing the allergen.
Alveoli	Tiny air sacs within the lungs where the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide takes place.
Anaphylaxis	A very serious, life threatening allergic reaction requiring immediate medical help.
Antibiotic	Medication used to treat infection caused by bacteria. Antibiotics do not protect against viruses and do not prevent the common cold.
Antibodies	A specialized protein the immune system makes in order to protect against disease-causing allergens, or antigens. While some antibodies are helpful, others may cause potentially harmful responses, including allergic reactions.
Antihistamine	This medication treats allergic rhinitis ("hay fever") and conditions such as hives. Antihistamines help prevent the effects of histamine, which is a chemical released by your body during an allergic reaction which could trigger an asthma attack.
Asthma	A chronic, inflammatory disorder of the airways characterized by wheezing, breathing difficulties, coughing, chest tightness, and other possible symptoms. People with asthma have very sensitive airways that are constantly on the verge of over-reacting to asthma triggers.
Asthma Attack	(also know as asthma episode or exacerbation) Term used to describe a worsening of asthma symptoms. Asthma attacks are episodic, and can differ in intensity.
Breath sounds	Noises produced by the structures of the lungs during breathing.
Bronchi (singular, Bronchus)	The large air tubes leading from the trachea to the lungs that convey air to and from the lungs. The bronchi have cartilage as part of their supporting wall structure. The trachea divides to form the right and left main bronchi which, in turn, divide to form the lobar, segmental, and finally the subsegmental bronchi.

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Bronchial tubes	Airways in the lungs. There is one major branch going into each lung, and these then divide into many smaller branches.
Bronchioles	The smallest branches of the airways in the lungs. They connect to the alveoli (air sacs).
Bronchoconstriction	When the muscles that wrap the airways constrict tighter and tighter, pinching the airways closed.
Bronchospasm	The tightening of the muscle bands that surround the airways, causing the airways to narrow.
Carbon dioxide	A colorless, odorless gas that is formed in the tissues and is delivered to the lungs to be exhaled.
Chronic disease	A disease that can be controlled, but not cured.
Cilia	Hair-like structures that line the airways in the lungs and help to clean out the airways.
Contraindication	A reason not to use a course of treatment or medication.
Control drug/ Controller Medication	A type of drug that controls asthma symptoms or prevents them from occurring by reducing inflammation and relieving airway constriction.
Dander, animal	Tiny scales shed from animal skin or hair. Dander floats in the air, settles on surfaces and is a major part of household dust. Cat dander is a classic cause of allergic reactions.
Decongestant	Medication that shrinks swollen nasal tissues to relieve symptoms of nasal swelling, congestion, and mucus secretion.
Diaphragm	The major muscle used in breathing, located at the base of the lungs.
Dry powder inhaler (DPI)	A small device similar to a metered dose inhaler, where the drug is in powder form. The patient exhales out a full breath, places the lips around the mouthpiece, then quickly breathes in the powder.
Dust mites	Microscopic, insect-like pests that generate some of the most common indoor substances – or allergens – that can trigger allergic reactions and asthma in many people.
Dyspnea	A difficulty in breathing or shortness of breath, also known as air hunger or breathlessness.
Environmental Trigger	An allergen derived from environmental sources that causes a worsening of asthma symptoms. Triggers for asthma includes common allergens such as dust mites, animal dander, food, pollen, mold, drugs, and also non-allergens like second-hand smoke, smog, viral infections, fumes/odors, cold air, changes in weather and temperature as well as exercise.
Epinephrine	Epinephrine injection is used to treat life-threatening allergic reactions caused by insect bites, foods, medications, latex, and other causes. Symptoms of allergic reaction include wheezing, shortness of breath, low blood pressure, hives, itching, swelling, stomach cramps, diarrhea, and loss of bladder control. Epinephrine is in a class of medications called sympathomimetic agents. It works by relaxing the muscles in the airways and tightening the blood vessels.
Exacerbation	Any worsening of asthma . Onset can be acute and sudden, or gradual over several days.

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Exercise induced asthma	Exercise-induced asthma is distinct from allergic asthma in that it does not produce long-term increase in airway activity. People who only experience asthma when they exercise may be able to control their symptoms with preventive measures such as warm-up and cool-down exercises.
Exhalation	The act of breathing out air. During exhalation, the diaphragm relaxes and moves upward, causing compression of the lungs and an outward flow of air. Also called <i>expiration</i> .
Food allergy	Food allergy is an abnormal response to a food triggered by your body's immune system. Allergic reactions to food can sometimes cause serious illness and death. Tree nuts and peanuts are the leading causes of deadly allergic reactions called anaphylaxis.
Hay fever	Seasonal sneezing, nasal congestion, and tearing and itching of the eyes caused by allergy to the pollen of certain plants. Unless properly treated, about one-third of patients with hay fever develop asthma .
HEPA Filter	A HEPA (High Efficiency Particle Arresting) filter can remove the majority of harmful particles, including mold spores, dust, dust mites, pet dander and other irritating allergens from the air. Along with other methods to reduce allergens, such as frequent dusting, the use of a HEPA filtration system can be a helpful aid in controlling the amount of allergens circulating in the air.
Histamine	A naturally occurring substance in the body that causes allergic reactions (redness, itching, and swelling) of the nose and eyes. This reaction can also occur in the lung, causing the airways to narrow.
Hypersensitivity	An overreaction to a certain stimulus that normally doesn't cause a reaction. In asthma, it refers to the airways being overly reactive to certain triggers, causing them to close up (bronchoconstrict).
Hyperventilation	Abnormally fast or deep respiration, which results in the loss of carbon dioxide from the blood, thereby causing a fall in blood pressure, tingling of the extremities, and sometimes fainting.
Hypoallergenic	Not likely to cause an allergic reaction.
Immune system	The immune system, which is made up of special cells, proteins, tissues, and organs, defends people against germs and microorganisms every day. The immune system is the body's defense against infectious organisms and other invaders.
Immunotherapy	A series of shots that help build up the immune system's tolerance to an asthma trigger.
Inflammation	In asthma , the lining of the airways become swollen and red, usually caused by irritants, allergies or infections.
Inhalation	Breathing air into the lungs.
Inhaler	An inhaler is a device that gets medicine directly into a person's lungs. The medicine is a mist or spray that the person breathes in. Unlike a pill or liquid that is swallowed, an inhaler gets medicine right to the lungs. This helps people with asthma because the medicine works quickly to open up narrowed airways. There are two kinds of inhalers: metered dose inhalers (MDI), also known as puffers, and dry powder inhalers.
Irritants	Things that bother the nose, throat or airways when they are inhaled (not an allergen).
Leukotrienes	Chemicals that occur naturally in our bodies and cause tightening of airway muscles and production of mucus and fluid.

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Long term control medication	A medication that must be taken every day to control asthma symptoms; not used for quick relief.
Metered dose inhaler (MDI)	The most common device used to take asthma medication. An MDI allows you to inhale a specific amount of medicine (a "metered dose"). It consists of a metal canister, which keeps the medication under pressure, and a plastic sleeve, which helps to release the medication. When you press the canister, medicine particles are propelled toward your throat where you can inhale them into your lungs.
Monitoring	Keeping track of.
Mucus / Mucous	Thick fluid produced by the moist membranes that line many body cavities and structures. Also called "phlegm". It is normally produced in the lungs but there can be too much mucous in the lungs when asthma is not well controlled.
Nebulizer	A machine that changes liquid medicine into fine droplets (in aerosol or mist form) that are inhaled through a mouthpiece or mask. Nebulizers can be used to deliver bronchodilator (airway-opening) medications, as well as anti-inflammatory medicines. A nebulizer may be used instead of a metered dose inhaler (MDI). It is powered by a compressed air machine and plugs into an electrical outlet.
Peak Expiratory flow (PEF) rate	A measurement of how well you can blow air out of your lungs. If your airways become narrow and blocked due to asthma , you can't blow air out as well, and your PEF values drop.
Peak flow meter	A peak flow meter is a small, easy-to-use instrument that reveals how well your lungs are working. It does this by measuring your peak expiratory flow, which tells you how fast you can blow out air after a maximum inhalation. You use the peak flow meter to help you identify lung performance patterns, which give you information to prevent asthma episodes and develop your asthma management plan.
Personal best peak expiratory flow	The highest peak flow number a person can achieve when symptoms are under good control. The personal best PEF is the number to which all other peak flow readings will be compared.
Pneumonia	Pneumonia is an inflammation of your lungs, usually caused by infection. Bacteria, viruses, fungi or parasites can cause pneumonia.
Pollen	Pollen is a fertilizing element of plants that travels in the air and produces seasonal allergic responses (type I) such as hay fever or asthma in sensitive individuals.
Poorly Controlled Asthma	Common symptoms are: coughing, wheezing, chest tightness, shortness of breath, trouble sleeping (due to difficulty in breathing), and inability to take part in physical activities.
Productive cough	A cough that expels mucus or sputum from the respiratory tract.
Pulmonary function tests (PFTs)	A test or series of tests that measure many aspects of lung function and capacity; also referred to as lung function tests.
Pulse oximetry	A test in which a device that clips on the finger measures the oxygen level in the blood.

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Quick-relief medication / Rescue Medication	A medication that opens the airways quickly to relieve symptoms of an asthma attack (wheezing, coughing, shortness of breath). Quick relief medications are usually used only when symptoms occur.
Sinuses	The sinuses are hollow air spaces located around the nose and eyes.
Sinusitis	An inflammation or infection of one or more sinuses.
Spacers (holding chamber)	Spacers (also called holding chambers) work with your metered dose inhaler (MDI) to deliver inhaled medication more easily and effectively, and can reduce side effects.
Spirometer	A device used to measure the amount of air inhaled and exhaled to determine the level of airway obstruction.
Sputum	Mucus or phlegm from the smaller airways in the lower part of the lungs.
Symptom	Any abnormality that is experienced by an individual. An example is chest tightness that is felt when asthma is not well-controlled.
Trachea	The main airway (windpipe) supplying both lungs.
Triggers	Substances or situations that can cause inflammation or swelling in the airway. Some common triggers are cigarette smoke, animal dander, dust mites and viral infections such as a cold.
Vaccine	A shot that protects the body from a specific disease by stimulating the body's own immune system.
Wheezing	A high-pitched, hoarse whistling noise that comes from the chest as air is forced through airways that are too narrow.

Note: italicized words are found elsewhere in this glossary.