Take Charge of Your Asthma

For more information, call Customer Service at 1(415) 547-7800 or visit sfhp.org

Free 24/7 Nurse Help Line: 1(877) 977-3397
What is Asthma?

Asthma is a condition that affects the air passages (or airways) leading into your lungs and can make it hard for you to breathe. It can also make you cough a lot.

With asthma, your air passages are affected in these ways:

- Airway muscles tighten and thicken.
- Your airways make extra mucus.
- Airways become irritated and swollen.
- Airways stay more sensitive to irritation and triggers.

Asthma breathing problems often come and go. Some people with asthma only have symptoms once in a while. Other people have symptoms every day. Some people are worse at certain times of the year.

While asthma can’t be cured, you CAN work with your health care provider to control your asthma. Controlling your asthma means:

Controlling your asthma means:

- You can play and exercise without problems.
- You can sleep well through the night.
- You don’t miss school days or work because of asthma.
- No emergency room visits or hospital stays because of asthma attacks.
- Few or no side effects from medicine.

What Does Asthma Feel Like?

Asthma is not the same for everyone. You may have some or all of these symptoms with your asthma:

- **Cough:** you may cough a lot, even when you don’t have a cold. The cough may last a long time. It may wake you up at night or early in the morning. You may cough when you play or exercise.

- **Wheeze:** wheezing is a whistling sound when you breathe. This is air trying to go through narrow airways. Wheezing happens when the airway muscles tighten and thicken.

- **Shortness of breath:** you may have trouble breathing or feel like you can’t get enough air. You may need to breathe faster than normal.

- **Chest tightness:** when your chest feels tight or heavy. Your chest may hurt or feel like something is squeezing or pressing on it. You may feel like it is hard to get air in and out of your lungs.

- **Fatigue/tiredness:** you may get tired more easily than usual.

Know your symptoms so you can act quickly when they start or when they get worse. Make an action plan with your health care provider. Acting early can keep symptoms from getting worse, so you will still be able to go to school, work, and stay out of the hospital. On follow-up visits, your provider will check your asthma control. Take the Asthma Control Test to figure out how in control your symptoms are.

sfhp.org | 1(415) 547-7800
About Asthma Attacks

An asthma attack is when your asthma symptoms get out of control and make you sick.

Talk to your doctor about creating an Asthma Action Plan. See p.16 for more details.

Early signs of an asthma attack can include:
• An increase in cough, mucus, wheezing, chest tightness, and feeling out of breath.
• Waking up more often because of cough or trouble breathing.
• Not being able to do your normal activities.
• Using more of your rescue medicine than what is normal for you.
• Not getting as much relief from your rescue medicine. If this happens, call your health care provider right away. Waiting too long can lead to an asthma attack that is serious or life threatening.

Signs of a serious asthma attack can include:
• Cough, wheezing, or chest tightness that is worse than normal.
• Lips or fingernails may turn blue.
• Breathing hard and fast.
• May not be able to walk or talk well.
• Ribs may show more than normal when you are breathing in. If this happens, call your doctor or 9-1-1 right away.

What is a Trigger?

An asthma trigger is something that makes your asthma symptoms start up or get worse. Different people have different triggers. Put an “x” next to each of the triggers below that you think make your asthma worse. Your doctor may test you for some allergic triggers, like dust, pollen, mold, and pet dander.

Indoor (At Home, Work, or School)
• Smoke from cigarettes, marijuana, pipes, cigars, or a fireplace.
• Strong smells (like cleaning products or perfumes).
• Dust or dust mites.
• Mold.
• Cats, dogs, or other animals.
• Rats, mice, or cockroaches.

Outdoor
• Cold or very hot weather.
• Air pollution or smog.
• Changes in weather or seasons.
• Pollen.
• Plants, flowers, grass, or trees.

Other Triggers
• Stress or worry.
• Colds or other sickness.
• Exercise or play.
• Certain medicines.

Use the Symptom Diary on p.6 to keep track of your triggers.

Learn what triggers your asthma. Try to avoid your triggers. If you feel your asthma getting worse, try to recall what triggers you may have been around. Keeping a symptom diary can help you learn your patterns and what triggers your asthma. Sometimes, triggers change over time. Keeping a symptom diary can help you figure out if your triggers change. Also, plan ahead: take your rescue medication beforehand if you know you will be around triggers, and remember to bring it with you.
Record Your Symptoms

Write down your asthma symptoms on the chart below or on a separate chart to help identify your asthma triggers and see how well your treatments are controlling your asthma.

Symptom Diary Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Symptom</th>
<th>What was the trigger?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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</tbody>
</table>

Your Asthma is Well Controlled If

- You can do all of your normal activities.
- You have symptoms no more than 2 days a week, and these symptoms don’t wake you up more than 2 nights a month.
- You take quick-relief (rescue) medicines for relief of asthma symptoms no more than 2 days a week. This does not include using your quick-relief medicine to prevent asthma triggered by exercise.
- You have no more than one asthma attack a year when you have to take corticosteroid medication by mouth.
- Your peak flow doesn’t drop below 80% of your personal best number. Learn more about peak flow on p.11.
Dealing With Triggers

There are many things you can do to get rid of triggers. Depending on what triggers your asthma, some of the tips below may help.

Cut Odors

- If you smoke, try to quit. Talk to your doctor about free nicotine patches and counseling. Call the California Smokers’ Quitline at 1(800) NO-BUTTS to get help with quitting.
- If you continue to smoke, do it outside. Wear a special jacket that stays outside. Wash your hands and face when returning home. Smoke smell in the home or car can trigger asthma.
- Try to stay away from people who are smoking.
- Avoid using strongly scented products, such as home deodorizers and incense, and perfumed laundry products and personal care products.
- Stay away from bleach, ammonia, and other strong disinfectants. Plain soap, lemon juice, baking soda, and vinegar diluted with water are safer for cleaning.

Be Aware of Outdoor Triggers

- Try to stay indoors when pollen and mold counts are high.
- Keep windows closed and try not to use fans during pollen season.
- Check for “Spare the Air” days and nights. Don’t exercise outside at those times. Visit www.sparetheair.com for alerts.
- On very bad pollution days, stay indoors with windows closed.
- If cold air is a problem, try breathing through your nose. Cover up with a scarf.

Get Rid of Dust and Mold

- Clean mold off hard surfaces with soap in hot water. Scrub with stiff brush, and then rinse clean with water. Couches and curtains with mold may need to be replaced.
- If possible, people with asthma shouldn’t be home during cleaning. Dust and cleaning products can be triggers for people with asthma. If the person who cleans the house has asthma, get some protection. Rubber gloves and a dust mask covering the nose and mouth can help.
- Vacuum weekly and make sure your vacuum has a good filter. Damp mop floors weekly.
- Use exhaust fans or open windows for air when showering or cooking. This can prevent mold from growing.
- Cover mattresses and pillows in dust-mite proof zippered covers.
- Wash bedding and stuffed toys in hot water every 1-2 weeks. Freeze stuffed toys that aren’t washable for 24 hours. Cut clutter and remove stuffed animals, especially around the bed.
- Remove carpet if you can. Wet carpet first, then dry floor completely.
- Request that the heating system filters in your building are replaced regularly.

Avoid Pests and Animals

- To avoid pests do not leave food or garbage out. Store food in airtight containers.
- Try using traps and poison baits, such as boric acid for cockroaches. Instead of sprays/bombs, use baits placed away from children, such as behind refrigerator.
- Vacuum up cockroach bodies and fill holes in with caulking or copper wool.
- If possible, fix leaky plumbing, roof, and other sources of water that can attract pests.
- Think about not having pets. Try not to have pets with fur or feathers.
- Keep pets out of the bedroom of the person with asthma.
- Always wash your hands after petting animals.
Keep Your Body Healthy

- Keep your body healthy with enough exercise and sleep.
- Doing relaxation exercises can help clear the mind. Deep breathing and relaxing your muscles can lower anxiety.
- Don’t get too close to with people who have colds.
- Avoid cold and flu by washing your hands often. Try not to touch your hands to your face.
- Get a flu shot each year.
- Warm up before exercising. Your provider may want you to take medication before your workout.
- Asthma symptoms can get worse at night. If breathing is easier sitting up, prop yourself up with pillows. Make sure the bedroom is warm enough at night.
- Other sicknesses or health problems can make asthma hard to control. Talk to your doctor about how to deal with issues such as colds, flu, nasal allergies, smoking, anxiety, depression, acid reflux, sinus pain, heart failure, or sleep apnea can affect your asthma.

Medicine is the Key for Asthma Control

Most asthma medicines come in the form of an inhaler. There are two kinds of medicine to treat asthma:

- **Long-term or Controller Medicine** is usually taken each day to prevent symptoms. It works to reduce irritation, swelling, and phlegm that narrow the airways. This medicine is the main way to control asthma and prevent flare-ups.
- **Reliever or Rescue Medicine** is used for flare-up or attack symptoms. It works to relax tight muscles around the airways. Use your reliever medicine for quick, temporary relief of asthma symptoms. Quick relief medicine usually helps for up to 4 hours. Your provider may also have you take this before you exercise to prevent asthma symptoms. If your asthma is well-controlled, you shouldn’t take quick-relief medicine more than 2 times per week to treat asthma symptoms.

Asthma Medicine Tips

Talk to your provider if you have any questions about the following:

- Take your asthma medicines as prescribed by your doctor.
- Make sure you are using your inhalers the right way.
- Most inhalers should be used with a spacer.
- For some medicines (inhaled steroids), you need to rinse your mouth and spit out after each use.
- You may also need to take allergy medicine to help prevent your asthma from flaring up.

Use the Asthma Plan on p.22 to keep track of your asthma meds.

Write down your asthma medicines to track why and when you use your medicine. You can also ask your doctor to print out a list of your medicines with instructions. This is also a part of your Asthma Action Plan on p.22.

Know Your Peak Flow

Some asthma patients may do better by tracking their asthma with a peak flow meter. A peak flow meter is a small plastic tool that measures how well air moves out of the lungs. High numbers (80% of your personal best) mean better airflow. Lower numbers (less than 50-79% of your personal best) mean your asthma is getting worse. Your doctor may prescribe a peak flow meter if it will help you better track your asthma.
Mental Health: Taking Care of Your Emotions

Taking care of your emotional health is just as important as taking care of your physical health. Often it can be helpful to talk with a professional counselor about emotional ups and downs in your life, especially if they start to get worse and take a toll on you.

Each person’s asthma experience is unique, but there are some feelings that many people with asthma experience at one time or another.

- **Fear and worry** (about the future, about your health).
- **Loss of control** (I’ll never get a handle on this).
- **Denial** (this can’t be happening to me, I’m not sick).
- **Anger** (it’s not fair, my body is turning against me).
- **Guilt** (I must have done something to make this happen).
- **Shame** (what will others think?).

Free Resources for SFHP Members:

Professionals are available to help you manage these kinds of issues in your life. You can find free services in your area to help you get back on track and feel better.

**Medi-Cal Members** - Call Beacon Health Strategies at 1(855) 371-8117.

**Healthy Kids HMO and Healthy Workers HMO** - Call San Francisco Community Behavioral Health Services (CBHS) at 1(888) 246-3333.

At home, check your peak flow to see how you are doing. When your asthma acts up, your peak flow may be lower. This is a sign for you to take action, and call your doctor.

If you are doing well, personal best peak flow numbers show you and your doctor that your medicines are working.
Caring for Your Mind and Body

There is no one way to deal with the emotions that having asthma can cause. Your emotions can also have a big effect on your asthma. Here are some coping methods that may help:

Find ways to manage stress in your life. Stress is part of daily life. It is also a common asthma trigger. Stress and anxiety can make you feel short of breath and make asthma symptoms worse. This can become a cycle when an oncoming attack then causes worry and anxiety.

- As much as possible, try to avoid situations that trigger stress for you.
- Try to be positive. What you think, how you think, what you expect, and what you tell yourself often decide how well you manage rising stress levels.
- Talk with someone about your problems. Reach out to friends and family for support.
- If you can’t resolve these stressors alone, get professional help by calling Beacon Health Strategies if you are a Medi-Cal member or CBHS if you are Healthy Kids HMO and Healthy Workers HMO member. You can also speak with your primary care provider.

Take an active role in taking care of yourself. Making healthy lifestyle changes can help improve your asthma.

- Get some exercise/move your body on most days of the week! It’s a great way to burn off the effects of stress—walking, dancing, yoga, and stretching are good activities. Ask your provider for tips to help you exercise with asthma. You may need to take reliever medicine before exercising. Remember to warm up slowly before an intense workout.
- Get enough sleep. It can help your immune system stay strong and help your mood, so you can feel happier and less stressed. Most people need 7 or 8 hours a night. Try to go to bed and wake up at about the same time every day, even on weekends.
- Eat healthy food as often as possible. A healthy meal starts with half your plate filled with vegetables and fruits, a quarter with lean protein, and a quarter with whole grains. The more colorful your plate is, the better. Limit alcohol, sugar, and processed foods. Don’t forget to drink a lot of water.

Learn and practice relaxation exercises. Relaxation exercises are simple to do and combine deep breathing, releasing of muscle tension, and clearing of negative thoughts. You can try:

- Repetitive phrases - repeat a phrase that triggers a physical relaxation, such as “Relax and Let Go.”
- Imagery - use your imagination to picture a person, place, or time that makes you feel relaxed, peaceful and happy.
- The UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center has free online guided meditations in English and Spanish at [www.marc.ucla.edu](http://www.marc.ucla.edu). Or search [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) for “mindfulness” or “meditation” exercises and you will find thousands to try.

Partner with your care team. You can take control of your asthma together.

- Find a health care provider you feel comfortable with.
- Keep your appointments so you can get the best care possible.
- Create an Asthma Action Plan with your care team. See p.18 as a guide.
- Make sure to ask your health care team any and all questions you have about your asthma. If you do not understand the answer, it is ok to ask again. It’s very important to know how to take care of your asthma!
Make an Asthma Action Plan

This is a plan that you make with your provider. It is split into green, yellow, and red zones. It will help you figure out what you need to do, based on how controlled your asthma is.

**GREEN ZONE**

It reminds you to take your controller medicines every day, even when you are feeling well.

**YELLOW ZONE**

- It helps you to know what to do when you have asthma symptoms.
- It helps you decide when to use your rescue medicines.
- It helps you to know when you need to see your doctor.

**RED ZONE**

It can help you decide when to go to the ER or call 9-1-1.

Your asthma action plan has all this information on one page. You can also give a copy to your school or workplace. Keep your asthma action plan up to date with all of your asthma and allergy medicines. Keep it where you can see it every day.
# My Asthma Action Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Controller medicines</th>
<th>How much to take</th>
<th>How often</th>
<th>Other instructions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>_______ times per day</td>
<td>□ Gargle or rinse mouth after use (steroid inhalers)</td>
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<td>EVERY DAY!</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>_______ times per day</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>EVERY DAY!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quick-relief medicines</td>
<td>How much to take</td>
<td>How often</td>
<td>Other instructions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Albuterol (Pro-Air, Ventolin, Provertil)</td>
<td>□ 2 puffs</td>
<td>Take ONLY as needed (see next page – starting in Yellow Zone or before exercise)</td>
<td>NOTE: If you need this medication more than two days a week, call your provider to consider increasing controller medications and discuss your treatment plan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Levalbuterol (Xopenex)</td>
<td>□ 4 puffs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ 1 nebulizer treatment</td>
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</table>

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Special instructions when I am:

😊 doing well  😞 getting worse  😞 having a medical alert

**DOING WELL – GREEN ZONE**

- No cough, wheeze, chest tightness, or shortness of breath during the day or night.
- I can do usual activities.

**Peak Flow** (for ages 5 and up): is ________ or more.

(80% or more of personal best)

**Personal Best Peak Flow** (for ages 5 and up): ________.

**PREVENT** asthma symptoms every day:

☐ Take my controller medicines (on page 18) every day.
☐ Before exercise, take ________ puff(s) of________________________.
☐ Avoid things that make my asthma worse. (see pages 6-8).

**GETTING WORSE – YELLOW ZONE**

- Cough, wheeze, chest tightness, short of breath, or
- Waking at night due to asthma symptoms, or
- Can do some, but not all, usual activities.

**Peak Flow** (for ages 5 and up): ________ to ________.

(50 to 79% of personal best)

**CAUTION** – Continue taking every day controller medicines, AND:

☐ Take ________ puffs or ________ nebulizer treatment of quick relief medicine. If I am not back in the **Green Zone** within 20-30 minutes take ________ more puffs or nebulizer treatments. If I am not back in the **Green Zone** within one hour, then I should:

☐ Increase_______________________________________________________
☐ Add __________________________________________________________
☐ Call __________________________________________________________

☐ Continue using quick relief medicine every 4 hours as needed.

Call provider if not improving in ________ days.

**MEDICAL ALERT – RED ZONE**

- Very short of breath, or
- Quick-relief medicines have not helped, or
- Cannot do usual activities, or
- Symptoms are same or get worse after 24 hours in **Yellow Zone**.

**Peak Flow** (for ages 5 and up): less than ________.  

(50% of personal best)

**MEDICAL ALERT! – Get Help!**

☐ Take quick relief medicine: _______ puffs every _______ minutes and get help immediately.

☐ Take__________________________________________________________
☐ Call __________________________________________________________

**DANGER! Get help immediately!**

Call 9-1-1 if trouble walking or talking due to shortness of breath or if lips or fingernails are gray or blue. For children, call 9-1-1 if skin is sucked in around neck and ribs during breaths or child does not respond normally.
## Medicine Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of asthma medication</th>
<th>Reason for taking</th>
<th>Dose (amount)</th>
<th>When to take (time of day or when you feel certain symptoms)</th>
<th>Dates used</th>
<th>Date refilled at pharmacy</th>
<th>Next time to refill</th>
<th>Peak flow measurement and date</th>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other medicines</th>
<th>Reason for taking</th>
<th>Dose (amount)</th>
<th>When to take (time of day or when you feel certain symptoms)</th>
<th>Dates used</th>
<th>Date refilled at pharmacy</th>
<th>Next time to refill</th>
<th>Side effects</th>
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## Rate Your Health!

### Life with Asthma Questions

Fill out the form below and bring it to your next appointment with your health care provider.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>I don’t know</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you know what asthma is?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you know how to control or prevent asthma attacks?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you see a specialist for your asthma?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you take your medicines exactly as your doctor recommends? If not, what gets in the way? Explain here:</td>
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<td>Do you have family or friends that can help you manage your health?</td>
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<td>Do you have any cultural or religious values that affect your care?</td>
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<td>Explain here:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you have any problems with keeping your doctor’s visits?</td>
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<tr>
<td>If yes, what gets in the way? Explain here:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are you interested in going to classes to help you manage your asthma better?</td>
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<tr>
<td>There may be changes you could make in your life to improve your health. On a scale of 1-5, where would you place yourself on being ready to make these changes? (1 is not even thinking about it, and 5 is already doing it)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*If you answered “More than Half the Days” or “Nearly Every Day” to either question, please call the phone number for Beacon or CBHS on p.13 right away. There are resources available to talk to someone about how you are feeling.

## How Are You Feeling?

**Over the past two weeks, how often have you been bothered by the following problems?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Some days</th>
<th>More than half the days*</th>
<th>Nearly every day*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Little interest or pleasure in doing things</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Feeling down, depressed or hopeless</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Questions to Ask Your Provider

For more information, call San Francisco Health Plan Customer Service at 1(415) 547-7800 or visit sfhp.org

Sources

Home Based Environmental Services for People with Asthma in San Francisco – Free home visits for people with asthma:
www.sfdph.org/dph/eh/asthma

SF Environment, Department of Public Health - Fact sheet on safe cleaning products:

Breathe California - Golden Gate – Free asthma education classes:
http://www.ggbreathe.org

Bay Area Spare the Air Program – Check for air quality alerts:
http://www.sparetheair.org

American Lung Association – Information about asthma:
1(800) 586-4872 www.lungusa.org

Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America – Information about asthma and allergies:
1(800) 727-8462 www.aafa.org

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - Information about asthma:
1(800) 232-4636 www.cdc.gov/asthma

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute - Information about asthma:
http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/asthma

RAMP (Regional Asthma Management and Prevention) Information about asthma: www.rampasthma.org

Mayo Clinic - Information about asthma: www.mayoclinic.org

San Francisco Health Plan Customer Service: 1(800) 288-5555
Health and wellness information: sfhp.org/members