<https://www.asthma.org.uk/advice/understanding-asthma/what-is-asthma/>

What is asthma?

Asthma is a long-term condition that affects your airways – the tubes that carry air in and out of your lungs.

It usually causes symptoms such as coughing, wheezing and breathlessness.

If you come into contact with one of your asthma triggers, it can make your symptoms worse and even bring on an asthma attack.

How do my airways react to triggers?

If you have asthma you have ‘sensitive’ airways that are inflamed and ready to react when they come into contact with something they don't like.

If you come into contact with one of your [asthma trigger](https://www.asthma.org.uk/advice/triggers/)s it causes your airways to react in three ways:

1. The muscles around the walls of the airways tighten so that the airways become narrower.
2. The lining of the airways becomes inflamed and starts to swell.
3. Sticky [mucus or phlegm](https://www.asthma.org.uk/advice/understanding-asthma/symptoms/phlegm-mucus-and-asthma/) sometimes builds up, which can narrow the airways even more.

These reactions in the airways make it difficult to breathe and lead to [asthma symptoms](https://www.asthma.org.uk/advice/understanding-asthma/symptoms/), such as chest tightness, wheezing, or coughing. It can also lead to an asthma attack.

Who gets asthma?

In the UK, around 5.4 million people are currently receiving treatment for asthma. That's one in every 12 adults and one in every 11 children.

Asthma affects more boys than girls. Asthma in adults is more common in women than men.

[It tends to run in families](https://www.asthma.org.uk/advice/understanding-asthma/causes/), especially when there's also a history of allergies and/or smoking.

Is asthma the same for everyone?

Everyone with asthma has their own personal set of triggers and symptoms. Using a [written asthma action plan](https://www.asthma.org.uk/advice/manage-your-asthma/action-plan/) is the best way to keep a record of your individual treatment plan.

You can have a certain ‘type’ of asthma too. For example, [occupational asthma](https://www.asthma.org.uk/advice/understanding-asthma/types/occupational-asthma/) is caused by triggers in your workplace. Around 4% of people with asthma have a type of asthma called [severe asthma](https://www.asthma.org.uk/advice/severe-asthma-old/), which needs specialist treatment because the usual medicines don’t keep symptoms under control.

Will I always have asthma?

Asthma is a lifelong condition; most people who have asthma will always have asthma.

But if you’ve been diagnosed with asthma as a child, your asthma might improve or disappear completely as you get older, particularly if the asthma was mild.

Even if asthma goes away it can come back later in life, perhaps because you’ve come into contact with new triggers in your job, or you’ve moved to an area with more [air pollution](https://www.asthma.org.uk/advice/triggers/pollution/)for example. [Hormonal changes such as pregnancy and menopause](https://www.asthma.org.uk/advice/manage-your-asthma/women/) can also bring it on again.

But the good news is that even though asthma doesn’t go away there are lots of safe and effective [treatments](https://www.asthma.org.uk/advice/inhalers-medicines-treatments/) available to help you stay symptom-free.

If you’ve tried taking all the usual treatments in the right way, but you’re still having symptoms, your GP can refer you to a specialist to see if you have severe asthma. This kind of asthma only affects around 4% of all people with asthma. An asthma specialist can help you find the right treatments for you, for example [monoclonal antibodies](https://www.asthma.org.uk/advice/severe-asthma/treating-severe-asthma/biologic-therapies/).

Can asthma get worse at different times in my life?

There are certain stages in your life that might affect your asthma. For example, some women find that [being pregnant can make asthma either better or worse](http://www.asthma.org.uk/advice-pregnancy) and hormonal changes, at [puberty, menopause](http://www.asthma.org.uk/advice-women)[or during the menstrual cycle](https://www.asthma.org.uk/advice/manage-your-asthma/women/) might have an impact too.

There are lots of other life changes that might temporarily affect your asthma symptoms. [Stress](http://www.asthma.org.uk/advice-trigger-stress), for example, whether from a relationship breakdown or family illness, can make symptoms worse.

Having frequent [asthma attacks](https://www.asthma.org.uk/advice/asthma-attacks/) can also make asthma worse over time. Asthma attacks can cause scarring in your airways which makes them narrower. This is sometimes called ‘airway remodelling’.

If your airways are scarred and narrow, you’re more likely to have worse symptoms more often.

How can I stop my asthma getting worse over time?

The best way to stop your asthma getting worse over time is to stick to a good routine of taking your [preventer medicines](https://www.asthma.org.uk/advice/inhalers-medicines-treatments/inhalers-and-spacers/preventer/) as prescribed.

And if you notice [your symptoms are getting worse](https://www.asthma.org.uk/advice/manage-your-asthma/getting-worse/), see your GP or asthma nurse as soon as possible so they can review your treatment.

You can also cut your risk of frequent asthma attacks, and your asthma getting worse, by [stopping smoking](https://www.asthma.org.uk/advice/triggers/smoking/).

Having an [asthma review](http://www.asthma.org.uk/advice-adult-asthma-review)at least once a year, gives you a chance to talk through any symptoms or new triggers. You can check you’re on the right medicine and that you’re u[sing your inhaler in the right way](https://www.asthma.org.uk/advice/inhalers-medicines-treatments/using-inhalers/) to get the most benefits.

You can also talk to your GP or asthma nurse about whether you need a higher dose or an [‘add-on’ treatment](https://www.asthma.org.uk/advice/inhalers-medicines-treatments/add-on-treatments/) to help with symptoms.

How serious is asthma?

Tragically, three people die every day because of asthma attacks and research shows that two thirds of asthma deaths are preventable.

The reassuring fact is that most people with asthma who get the right treatment - and take it correctly - can manage their symptoms and get on with what they want to do in life.

Can asthma be cured?

Here at Asthma UK we're [striving to find a cure](https://www.asthma.org.uk/Testing/research2/), but currently there is no cure for asthma.

The good news, though, is that there are lots of safe and effective [treatments](https://www.asthma.org.uk/advice/inhalers-medicines-treatments/) available to manage the symptoms.

You just need to work with your GP or asthma nurse to find the ones that work well for you, and get into good habits so you take them exactly as prescribed, so you can get the benefits.