

Recognizing Asthma Signs & Symptoms

Recognizing the signs and symptoms of asthma is an important part of managing asthma. Knowing when early warning signs or mild symptoms are occurring is helpful so that treatment and other interventions can begin early. Early treatment is most effective. If severe symptoms are present, it is vital to begin the appropriate treatment immediately. Accurate and timely assessment of your symptoms or your child's symptoms can help you and your clinician decide if treatment should begin in the home, at your clinician's office or in the emergency room.

Early Warning Signs

Early warning signs are experienced before the start of an asthma episode. By recognizing these clues that occur before actual asthma symptoms, early treatment can be started. These signs are unique to each person. Early warning signs may be the same, similar or entirely different with each episode. Some early warning signs may be noticed only by the individual, while other early warning signs are more likely to be noticed by other persons. In addition, a downward trend in peak flow numbers can be a reliable early warning sign. Some examples of early warning signs are:

- Breathing changes
- Sneezing
- Moodiness
- Headache
- Runny/stuffy nose
- Coughing
- Chin or throat itches
- Feeling tired
- Dark circles under eyes
- Trouble sleeping
- Poor tolerance for exercise
- Downward trend in peak flow number
- For a complete checklist of early warning signs, see page 4.

Asthma Symptoms

Asthma symptoms indicate that an asthma episode is occurring. Examples of asthma symptoms include:

- Wheezing
- Coughing



- Shortness of breath
- Tightness in the chest
- Peak flow numbers may be in the yellow zone (usually 50% to 80% of personal best).

Changes have taken place in the airways and airflow is obstructed. Individuals with asthma experience some or all of these during an asthma episode. Action should be taken to treat these symptoms before they become worse. Talk with your health care provider about having a written asthma action plan.

Severe Asthma Symptoms

Severe asthma symptoms are a life-threatening emergency. These symptoms indicate respiratory distress. Examples of severe asthma symptoms include:

- Severe coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath or tightness in the chest
- Difficulty talking or concentrating
- Walking causes shortness of breath
- Breathing may be shallow and fast or slower than usual
- Hunched shoulders (posturing)
- Nasal flaring (Nostril size increases with breathing)
- Neck area and between or below the ribs moves inward with breathing (retractions)
- Gray or bluish tint to skin, beginning around the mouth (cyanosis)
- Peak flow numbers may be in the red zone (usually below 50% of personal best)

If any of these severe asthma symptoms occur, seek emergency medical treatment right away. Have your asthma action plan for getting emergency care quickly in the event of severe asthma symptoms. Inform family members and those who are close to you or your child of this emergency action plan.

Keeping a record of asthma symptoms in a symptom diary may be helpful in determining an action plan. There are many types of diaries available or you can use your own notebook. Some things to watch for and record are:

- Asthma symptoms and their severity
- Peak flow numbers and/or peak flow zones
- School/Work days missed because of asthma
- Number of nighttime awakenings due to asthma symptoms
- A change in the use of quick-relief medicine
- Visits to the doctor
- Emergency room visits and hospital stays, if any.

It is very important to work with your doctor or other health-care provider to determine the best action plan for early warning signs and for asthma symptoms. These are guidelines and the individual action plan should be determined by you and your health care provider.

Early Warning Signs of Asthma Checklist

People with asthma have noted the following early warning signs. Check the signs that you or your child have experienced in the past. Use a pencil so you can update the list. You may want to list other personal early warning signs at the bottom of the page.

Breathing changes
 Feel funny in chest
 Headache

Feeling tired
 Want to be alone
 Get quiet

- Easily upset
- Eyes look glassy
- Dark circles under eyes
- Get excited
- Watery eyes
- Sweaty
- Feverish
- Chin or throat itches
- Coughing
- Change in sputum (mucus)
- Dry mouth
- Poor tolerance for exercise
- A downward trend in peak flow numbers

- Feel weak
- Slow down
- Feel sad
- Pale
- Stuffy nose
- Restless
- Grumpy
- Heart beats faster
- Sneezing
- Runny nose
- Trouble sleeping

List other early warning signs that are not listed above:

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