

# Asthma

## Fact Sheet



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### What is Asthma?<sup>1,2</sup>

Asthma is a chronic inflammation of the airways in the lungs. The inflammation causes the airways to swell, tighten, and narrow. When this happens breathing becomes difficult. The most common asthma symptom is frequent coughing, especially at night or after exercise. Other asthma symptoms include shortness of breath, chest tightness, and wheezing.

### Who Gets Asthma?

Nearly 25 million Americans currently have asthma.<sup>3</sup> Asthma is the most common chronic childhood disease, affecting about 1 child in every 10.<sup>4</sup> The disease affects people of any race, age or gender. African Americans have the most difficulty, particularly women and children.<sup>5</sup> Currently, 4 million African Americans have asthma.<sup>6</sup> No one knows exactly why some people get asthma and others do not. Medical researchers have found that having a family member who has allergies or asthma, or being exposed to certain things in the environment, can increase the chance a person will develop asthma.<sup>1</sup>

### Things that Cause Asthma Attacks:<sup>7,8,9,10</sup>

Asthma triggers, including irritants and allergens, can bring on an asthma attack by making your airways more swollen and inflamed and by causing the muscles around your airways to tighten. Allergens cause an allergic reaction that can trigger an asthma attack. Irritants from the environment can also irritate your lungs. Other things, like having the cold or flu, can trigger asthma attacks too. Different people have different asthma triggers. Talk with your doctor about what makes your asthma worse. Then decide with your doctor what to do to manage your triggers.

#### **IRRITANTS**

*(things in the environment that irritate airways)*

Tobacco smoke  
Other smoke (kerosene heater, fireplace)  
Strong odors and sprays (cleaning products, unvented gas stove, perfume, hair spray)

#### **ALLERGENS**

*(things that cause an allergic reaction)*

Animal dander (cats, dogs)  
Dust mites  
Cockroaches  
Pollen (grass, tree, ragweed)  
Indoor mold  
Outdoor mold

#### **OTHER ASTHMA TRIGGERS**

*(more things that can make asthma worse)*

Exercise or physical activity  
Viral infections (colds, flu)  
Sinusitis (sinus infection)  
Some medications  
Sulfites in foods (shrimp, dried fruit, processed potatoes)  
Weather changes (cold air)