

# What is Asthma?

Asthma is a chronic disease of the lung airways. A person with asthma has airways that are extra-sensitive to, and irritated by, various things called asthma triggers.

**Asthma triggers** are different for different people, but could include:

- **Illnesses**, such as colds or the flu
- **Allergies** to dust, pollen and plants, mold, animals, and certain foods
- **Exercise**
- Cold air or warm air, wind, **sudden changes in temperature**
- **Smoke** (especially cigarette or cigar), air pollution, strong smells
- **Emotional stress** or **strong emotions** (crying, laughing, anxiety)

Air travels in and out of our lungs through airways as we breathe. With asthma, the airways become very sensitive and swollen. This causes extra fluid to form. The muscles around the airways also tighten. All of this makes it hard to breathe. When this happens it is called a flare-up. These things can make you feel symptoms like wheezing (a whistling sound in your chest), cough, difficulty breathing, tightness in your chest and shallow breathing, and a lower peak flow (measured with a "peak flow meter").

There is no cure for asthma, but it can be controlled and people can live normal, active lives. Work with your provider and school nurse. Talk openly with them and ask questions. Ask for an asthma action plan to help you. The plan lets you know what to do when you have symptoms or feel sick, and how to prevent an asthma flare.



## What are the Symptoms of Asthma?

- **Shortness of breath** – your child feels like he/she can't breathe fully.
- **Tightness in the chest** – your child feels like a strap is around his/her chest.
- **Wheezing** – a whistle sound when your child breathes out.
- **Coughing lasting more than a week** – a consistent cough, especially at night.

For more information call Customer Service at **(415) 615-4555**.

Or visit **[www.healthysanfrancisco.org](http://www.healthysanfrancisco.org)**

## With Well-Controlled Asthma, You Will Have:

- Fewer symptoms
- Fewer asthma “flare-ups” (also called attacks or episodes)
- Active participation in physical activities
- Normal or almost normal lung capacity
- Fewer or no side effects from using your asthma medications

### Four Main Ways to Manage Your Asthma:

- 1. Make a plan.** Work with your provider to make an Asthma Action Plan just for you, so you know how to stay active and healthy, and what to do if you get sick.
- 2. The environment** – Avoid things in your physical environment that could cause symptoms, like smoke or strong perfumes or pets.
- 3. Your airways** – Use medications called controllers or preventers to control airway inflammation.
- 4. Asthma attacks or episodes** – Be alert to early stages of symptoms, and react immediately by taking medication and by avoiding the asthma triggers, if possible.

## Avoiding Your Asthma Triggers

The more triggers that you are exposed to at the same time, the more likely that you will have symptoms. For example, if you are sensitive to cold air, dust, and cats, being near all three of these close together in time (1 day or so) may cause an asthma attack. Sometimes being near one trigger will not cause an attack, but being near three will cause one. When you have an attack, think about what triggers you were near. Avoid as many triggers as possible!

More information about asthma management in San Francisco schools can be found here:

[www.sfgov3.org/index.aspx?page=702](http://www.sfgov3.org/index.aspx?page=702)

RAMP has downloadable asthma action plans in multiple languages:

[www.rampasthma.org](http://www.rampasthma.org)

Adapted from:

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[www.rampasthma.org](http://www.rampasthma.org)