

Module 4: Understanding Your Triggers

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Asthma Triggers

If you have asthma, you may have noticed that when you are around certain things, your asthma gets worse. The things that can cause problems for you are called “triggers”, because they can trigger an asthma attack. Different people have different triggers. It is important to know what your triggers are so that you can stay away from them as much as possible.



There are many triggers that make asthma worse, but the triggers are different for every person. Learn what your triggers are and learn how to deal with them. Many people with asthma learn how to keep their asthma under control and you can too!

Tracking Your Asthma

One way to find out what your triggers are is keep a notebook where you write down where you were or what you were doing when your asthma started to get worse. Notice the things around you that may be a problem for you. Sometimes the things that trigger an asthma attack are hard to see or to notice. We will talk about some triggers that many people have so that you can get ideas about what things to watch for to see if they cause a problem for you. There are a lot of triggers listed here, but not all of them affect all people with asthma. Only you can figure out what your triggers are.



Foods

Certain foods may have something about them that can cause your asthma to get worse. Many people who have allergies to milk, nuts, fish, dry fruit (like raisins or prunes), eggs, shellfish (like shrimp or crab), or wheat (found in flour and baked goods) find that these things also trigger an asthma attack. Pay attention to what foods you may have eaten or been around when your asthma got worse. Write those foods in your notebook so that you can see if being around them again causes a problem. If certain foods cause a problem for you, it is important that you stay away from them.



What to Do About Food Allergies?

Once you find out what foods or ingredients can cause your asthma to get worse, you need to ask questions about what is in the food you are served at school or in a restaurant. You want to make sure that you do not eat something that will trigger your asthma to get worse

You need to read food labels when you are buying food from the grocery store. Food labels will give you information about what is in a food. It may also warn you that the food was made or processed in a factory that uses something that you need to stay away from. For example, many people have a problem with nuts and food labels often say something like, “this product was produced in a factory that also processes nuts”.

That means that even though the food you are buying doesn't have nuts, there may be some tiny bit of nut that got into the food at the factory.



Other Tips:

- Wear a medic-alert bracelet that shows others what your food allergies are
- Doctors have some people carry around an emergency pen that gives medication into the body right away if you have a really bad reaction to a certain food. Ask your doctor if this is something you might need.



Learn more about [Asthma Triggers](#)

Pollen

Plants produce pollen which are very tiny little pieces of plant material that can be blown by the wind or picked up by insects like bees as they land on flowers. The pollen sticks to their feet and when they fly through the air, it can blow off. It can be hard to stay away from pollen, especially in spring when plants are flowering and getting new leaves.



What to Do About Pollen?

- If pollen is one of your triggers, try to stay indoors when pollen is high. The pollen count is usually announced on the news if it is high.
- If you are indoors, use air conditioning if you can. That will help clean the air.
- If you have to be outdoors, you might want to wash your hair and change clothes when you come indoors.

Learn more about [Asthma Triggers](#)

Dust and Dust Mites

Many people with asthma are allergic to dust mites. You can't see dust mites because they are so small, but they live everywhere that people live. They are often in mattresses, carpet, pillows, and cloth covered furniture, as well as in dust. They live on the flakes of skin that fall off people and animals as they move around.



What to Do About Dust Mites?

If dust mites are a problem for you, it is very important that you try to keep your living and sleeping space as clean as possible.

- Dust at least every week.
- Wash your sheets and bed covers in hot water every week. Get rid of extra items that collect dust.
- Put your pillow and mattress in an airtight cover and wipe the cover every week. They sell these kinds of covers to fit your mattress size and pillow in many stores.

If you have carpet, vacuum it often or remove it if possible. Learn more about [dust mites and asthma](#)

Cockroaches

Cockroaches can be a problem in any home and they can be difficult to get rid of. Many people are allergic to cockroaches and cockroaches often make asthma worse.

What to Do About Cockroaches?

Try using roach traps or roach baits.

- Get rid of any food or food crumbs lying around on counters or in pet food bowls.
- Try to keep all food in closed-up containers that roaches can't get into. Be sure to clean counters and floors of any food or spills that might draw cockroaches.
- If insect sprays must be used, be sure that you are not home when this happens. It would be good to have a window open to blow away the smell after the spraying. Stay away for a few hours after the spraying if you can.



Learn more about [cockroaches and asthma](#).

Molds

Molds are very common and can cause breathing problems for many people, especially those with asthma. Foods like certain cheeses or beer are made using molds. Mold forms anywhere that is damp or moist. Mold can form on shower curtains, carpet, or on ceilings, behind walls, or on floors where there is a water leak. If you leave a pile of wet clothes, mildew (a kind of mold) will form. You can tell when the clothes start to stink that something is wrong. Mold also forms outside in wet leaves, grass, wet newspapers or even in dirt.



What to Do About Molds?

- It is important to keep moisture under control in your home so that mold does not grow.
- Be sure to fix any water leaks and to keep kitchen and bathroom areas clean so that mold won't grow.
- Stay away from anything containing mold if you find that it triggers your asthma to get worse.

Learn more about [molds and asthma](#).

Smoke

There are different kinds of smoke and many of them cause problems for people with asthma. Tobacco smoke is one of the most common kinds of smoke, but there is also smoke from grills, engines, fireplaces, candles, and burning leaves. Smoke can cause serious breathing problems and even death. Most people who die in fires die from breathing the smoke before the fire ever gets to them.



What to Do About Smoke?

- Stay away from smoke.
- If people in your home smoke, see if they will smoke outside or even stop smoking. The smell of smoke on someone who has been smoking can even cause problems.
- Try to avoid areas where there has been smoke or where engines are running or something is burning.

Learn more about [tobacco smoke and asthma](#)

Strong Odors and Sprays

Many cleaning products, perfumes, or other sprays can cause an asthma attack or breathing problems. Even laundry detergent can have added perfume that can cause a problem.



What to do About Strong Smells and Sprays?

- If you think these kinds of things are triggers for you, then you must stay away from them.
- Do not use perfume or perfumed products like room deodorizers or some cleaning products.
- Stay away from fresh paint and even strong smells like food cooking.

Learn more about [strong smells and sprays](#).

Colds and Infections

Sometimes having a cold or the flu can trigger an asthma attack. If you find that you are coughing more or are having trouble breathing, you might need a change in your asthma care. Sinus problems can also make asthma worse.

What to Do About Colds?

- Talk to your doctor about getting a flu shot to help prevent getting the flu. Ask your doctor what you should do if you have sinus problems or get sick with a cold.
- It is important to stay away from other people who have a cold or the flu so that you don't get their germs. If you are around someone who is sick, be sure to keep your hands clean.
- You should wash your hands with soap and warm water for at least 15 seconds to be sure you get rid of any germs.
- If you are in a public bathroom, use a paper towel to turn off the water and to open the bathroom door so that you don't pick up any more germs.
- When you are sick, be sure to drink plenty of water and eat healthy food. Don't take any cold medicines without checking with your doctor first. If you are having breathing problems, let your doctor know and ask what you should do.



Exercise

Exercise is a trigger for most people with asthma because it changes the way you breathe and the amount of air you need to take in. Exercise includes playing ball, running around, or playing games that make you move a lot, like jumping rope. It's not just things like sit-ups or lifting weights. Don't exercise if you are having signs that your asthma is getting worse or if you are around asthma triggers like cold air or lots of pollen in the air. Ask your doctor what you should do to stay healthy while you exercise.

Learn more about [asthma and exercise](#).



Weather

Weather can be a trigger for many people. If the air is very cold or very hot and humid, that can affect your breathing. Changes of the seasons can also affect your breathing, especially if plants are flowering (pollen) or leaves are falling (mold). Even wind or rain can be a trigger.

What to Do About Weather?

Pay attention to the weather forecast on the news and to the reports of pollen or mold in the air. Use a scarf to cover your mouth and nose on windy days and stay indoors as much as you can if the weather causes you to have breathing problems. Pay attention to any signs that your asthma is getting worse and follow your asthma action plan. Call your doctor if you continue to have a problem or need advice on what to do.



Medicines That are Not for Asthma

There are some everyday medicines that can cause problems for people with asthma. Aspirin, ibuprofen (Motrin or Advil), or naproxen (Aleve) can all make asthma worse.

What to Do About Other Medicines?

Any time you are prescribed a new medicine, especially by a doctor who doesn't know about your asthma, you must ask whether or not it is safe for you to take since you have asthma. The pharmacist who fills your prescription can also answer questions about whether or not a medicine is safe for you to take.



Heartburn

Some people have a problem when they eat certain foods like spicy food or fatty food. Some drinks that have caffeine like coffee or colas can also cause problems. Heartburn is caused when the acid that digests the food in your stomach back-ups the tube that sends food to your stomach. If it backs-up far enough, it can affect your breathing.

What to Do About Heartburn?

If you have a problem with heartburn, try not to eat foods that increase the acid in your stomach like the foods mentioned above.

- Do not eat or drink anything for at least 2 hours before lying down or going to bed.
- Be sure to use a pillow that lifts up your head or raise the head of the bed by putting 6-inch blocks under it.
- Keeping your head higher than your stomach will help keep the acid from backing-up.



Feelings

Sometimes when you are upset or crying or angry or even laughing a lot, that can trigger an asthma attack. Anything that affects your breathing will affect your asthma.

What to Do About Feelings?

Find ways to relax and control your feelings. Ask your doctor about breathing exercises and ways to relax.



Great job! You're one step closer to finishing the CHECK Asthma Online Program. Hopefully you now know more about environmental asthma triggers.

Now you can move onto the next topic and learn about how to stay healthy.

