

Managing Your Asthma: Avoiding Irritants

Triggers are things that can irritate the airways or lead to reactions in those who are sensitized to them. There are two kinds of triggers, irritants and allergens. Irritant triggers can cause problems for anyone, but for people who have asthma, these irritants increase the risk of having symptoms. This fact sheet covers ways you can avoid irritants around you. For more information about managing allergen triggers go to ATS Patient Information Series at www.thoracic.org/patients.



Common irritants include tobacco smoke and vape, smoke from woodstoves or fires, air pollution/ozone, cold air and weather changes, infections/colds, and strong odors, including nice smells like perfume or candles. In general, everyone should avoid these irritants or limit exposure as much as possible even if they do not have asthma. If you are a parent or caregiver of a child with asthma, help your child learn to avoid these as well. Some schools or workplaces may have risks of irritant exposure and you should check to see that your asthma is not being bothered by a chemical or fume at your school or job. You can learn more about work exacerbated asthma at www.thoracic.org/patients.



Here are tips for avoiding or getting rid of common things around you that can irritate the airways and cause health problems:

Tobacco smoke or vaping fumes

Smoking and vaping are not healthy for anyone. They can also impact everyone nearby through the effects of secondhand smoke or vapor inhalation or thirdhand smoke (the invisible toxins left behind after smoke disappears). Tobacco smoke and vaping fumes can trigger asthma symptoms.

- Do not smoke or vape.
- If you currently smoke or vape, do not do these in your house or car, even when the person with asthma is not present.
- Have a strict no smoking policy—don't let others smoke or vape around you or your child.
- If you or someone you know needs help quitting smoking, call 1-800-QuitNow for free support.

Smoke from Stoves or Fires

Smoke can be irritating to anyone's eyes, nose and airways. People with asthma are more sensitive. Smoke from a wood-burning stove, grill or campfire can bring on asthma symptoms.

- Stand away from where smoke is moving if you have to be around a fire.
- Have good ventilation (air exchange) to get rid of smoke.

Air Pollution/Ozone

There are a number of chemicals and particles that can cause air pollution. These can come from sources such as cars, fires, and industry/factory emissions.

- Ozone is one of the major outdoor air pollutants—ozone levels are usually highest between May and October with higher temperatures, increased sunlight, and outside air conditions that help form air pollution.

- Check outdoor air pollution/ozone alerts—if there is a high alert, limit your and/or your child’s outdoor activity, particularly in the midday and afternoon when levels are highest.
- Follow guidelines for reduced time outside/ reduced outdoor activities when air quality levels are yellow, orange or red (remember all children—regardless of having asthma or not—are considered “sensitive” and should reduce exposure.)
- You can learn more about various air pollutants at www.epa.gov/haps.

Cold Air and Weather Changes

Some people with asthma are sensitive to cold or hot air. This may be more of a problem if asthma is not in good control. People with asthma may also be sensitive to weather changes like rain, wind or snow. It is hard to avoid the weather conditions.

- Check the weather forecast to know if you need to try to stay indoors or watch for asthma problems.
- In cold air, wear a scarf around face to warm air.
- Avoid temperatures that are too hot or too cold in your home.

Infections/Colds

Even a simple cold virus can trigger an asthma attack. While it can be hard to avoid viruses and bacteria at times, there are things you can do to try to prevent infections.

- Wash your hands with soap and water before eating and as often as possible throughout the day.
- Use alcohol-based hand sanitizers regularly.
- Keep your hands away from your mouth and nose.
- Avoid contact with those who are sick, as possible.
- Get a yearly flu vaccine and other vaccinations as recommended by your healthcare provider. For more about the flu or vaccines, [see www.thoracic.org/patients](http://www.thoracic.org/patients).

Strong Odors/Fragrances/Cleaning products

- Avoid use of all air fresheners, candles, perfumes.
- Air room well and open windows if cleaning or using cleaning products.
- Substitute natural or scent-free products when possible.
- Allow the house to air out for 8-12 hours after spraying for bugs before the person with asthma returns.
- Talk to the school/workplace about the importance of avoiding sources of strong odors.

Exercise

If your asthma is triggered by exercise, you still need to be physical active. Talk to your healthcare provider about ways to take action so you can safely exercise. For more information see “Exercise and Asthma” at www.thoracic.org/patients.

Action Steps:

You can manage asthma to avoid problems.

Take action by:

- ✓ Knowing your triggers and avoiding them as best you can.
- ✓ Avoid irritants as much as possible as they are not healthy for anyone’s lungs.
- ✓ Taking your asthma medicines as prescribed.
- ✓ Keeping regular follow-up with your asthma specialist and primary care provider.

Healthcare Provider’s Contact Number:

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Resources:

American Thoracic Society

- www.thoracic.org/patients

Centers for Disease Control (CDC)

- <https://www.cdc.gov/asthma/triggers.html>

Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America

- <https://www.aafa.org/asthma-triggers-causes/>

American Lung Association

- <https://www.lung.org/lung-health-and-diseases/lung-disease-lookup/asthma/living-with-asthma/managing-asthma/reduce-asthma-triggers.html>

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