ASTHMA DURING PREGNANCY

Asthma is a lung disease that causes your airways to tighten up, making it hard for you to breathe. There’s no cure for asthma. Even if you have asthma and feel healthy, asthma flares (when symptoms become severe) can happen at any time.

Most people with asthma can keep the disease under control and avoid serious health problems. If you’re pregnant, it’s really important to work with your health care provider to manage your asthma and get medical care, if needed.

How does asthma affect pregnancy?

Asthma affects 4 to 8 out of 100 pregnant women (4 to 8 percent). If you keep your asthma under control, it probably won’t cause any problems during your pregnancy.

If you don’t control your asthma, you may be at risk for a serious health problem called preeclampsia. [Preeclampsia](https://www.marchofdimes.org/complications/preeclampsia.aspx) is a condition that can happen after the 20th week of pregnancy or right after pregnancy. It’s when a pregnant woman has high blood pressure and signs that some of her organs, like her kidneys and liver, may not be working properly. Some of these signs include having protein in the urine, changes in vision and severe headache.

If you don’t control your asthma, your baby may not get enough oxygen. He may be at higher risk for health problems like:

* [Premature birth](https://www.marchofdimes.org/complications/premature-babies.aspx), birth that happens before 37 weeks of pregnancy
* Poor growth
* [Low birthweight](https://www.marchofdimes.org/complications/low-birthweight.aspx) (less than 5½ pounds)

Babies who are born too small and too soon are more likely to have newborn health problems. They can have trouble breathing and lasting disabilities, such as intellectual disabilities and [cerebral palsy](https://www.marchofdimes.org/complications/cerebral-palsy.aspx).

What are the signs and symptoms of asthma?

You may have one or more asthma symptoms. Signs and symptoms include:

* Tightness in the chest
* Constant cough (especially at night or in the early morning)
* Shortness of breath
* Wheezing (a whistling sound when you breathe)

What causes asthma symptoms?

One or more things can trigger your asthma. Some of the most common things that bring on asthma symptoms are:

**Allergens**
About 7 out of 10 people with asthma (70 percent) have allergies. An allergy is a reaction to something you touch, eat or breathe in that makes you sneeze, get a rash or have trouble breathing.

Allergens are things that cause you to have allergy symptoms. Many also cause asthma symptoms. Common allergens are pollens, molds, animal dander (small flakes of dead skin), dust mites and cockroaches. Limit your contact with allergens. If you still have asthma symptoms, talk to your health care provider.

Your provider may recommend that you take an allergy medicine. If you’re already getting allergy shots, you can keep taking them during pregnancy. But if you aren’t getting allergy shots, don’t start taking them when you’re pregnant because you could have a serious allergic reaction called anaphylaxis.

**Irritants**
Irritants are things in your [environment](https://www.marchofdimes.org/pregnancy/radiation-and-pregnancy.aspx) that may hurt your lungs and trigger asthma symptoms, including air pollution, [cigarette smoke](https://www.marchofdimes.org/pregnancy/smoking-during-pregnancy.aspx) and smoke from wood-burning stoves or fireplaces, cold air and strong smells, like paint or perfumes.

**Infections**
Infections like a cold, the flu or viral pneumonia, can trigger asthma symptoms in some people.

**Exercise**
[Exercise](https://www.marchofdimes.org/pregnancy/exercise-during-pregnancy.aspx) can cause asthma symptoms in some people. If your asthma is under control, you probably can exercise without any problems. But if exercising during pregnancy sets off your asthma, talk to your health care provider.

How is asthma diagnosed?

Asthma can be hard to diagnose. To find out if you have asthma, your health care provider takes your [health history](https://www.marchofdimes.org/pregnancy/your-family-health-history.aspx), does a physical exam and listens to your breathing.

You also may get a lung function test called spirometry. This is a test that checks how well your lungs work. During the test, you take a deep breath and exhale (blow) into a machine called a spirometer. This machine measures the amount of air you breathe in and out. It also measures how fast you can breathe. When you’re pregnant, normal changes in your body can make you short of breath. This test can help your provider know if shortness of breath is a common complication of pregnancy or if it’s caused by asthma.

How is asthma treated during pregnancy?

Your health care provider needs to monitor your lungs while you are pregnant so he can adjust your asthma medicines, if needed. Tell your provider if your symptoms improve or get worse. By limiting your contact with allergens and other asthma triggers, you may need to take less medicine to control your symptoms.

Is it safe to take asthma medicine during pregnancy?

Asthma symptoms that don’t stop or that get worse can be a risk to your and your baby. If you were taking asthma medicine before pregnancy, don’t stop taking it without talking to your provider first.

If you’re diagnosed with asthma during pregnancy, talk to your provider about the best way to treat or manage it.

If you’re already getting allergy shots, you can keep taking them during pregnancy. But if you aren’t getting allergy shots, don’t start taking them when you’re pregnant because you could have a serious allergic reaction called anaphylaxis.

Can asthma symptoms change during pregnancy?

Yes, asthma symptoms often change during pregnancy. Sometimes they get better and sometimes they get worse. We don’t really understand what causes these changes.

[Getting the flu](https://www.marchofdimes.org/complications/influenza-and-pregnancy.aspx) can set off serious asthma symptoms. Be sure to get a flu shot in October or November every year.

Heartburn also can make your symptoms worse. Here’s what you can do to help with heartburn symptoms:

* Sleep with your head up on a pillow (elevated).
* [Eat](https://www.marchofdimes.org/pregnancy/eating-healthy-during-pregnancy.aspx) smaller meals several times a day.
* Don’t eat within 2 hours of bedtime.
* Ask your provider about medicines you can take.

Do you need any special tests if you're pregnant and have asthma?

If your asthma is under control and mild, you may not need any special tests. If your asthma is not well controlled or if your asthma is moderate to severe, your provider may recommend repeated ultrasounds to check to make sure your baby’s growing normally. [Ultrasound](https://www.marchofdimes.org/pregnancy/ultrasound-during-pregnancy.aspx) uses sound waves and a computer screen to show a picture of your baby inside the womb. Your provider may start these at around 32 weeks of pregnancy.

Your provider also may recommend taking your baby’s heart rate with a fetal heart monitor. This allows him to check on your baby’s well-being.

Test results can alert your provider if you or your baby needs special care.

Can labor and birth set off asthma symptoms?

Only about 1 in 10 pregnant women with asthma (10 percent) have symptoms during [labor and birth](https://www.marchofdimes.org/pregnancy/stages-of-labor.aspx). Take your usual asthma medicines during labor and birth. If you still have asthma symptoms, your health care provider can help control them.

Are asthma medicines safe when you're breastfeeding?

Asthma medicines do get into your [breast milk](https://www.marchofdimes.org/baby/breastfeeding-is-best.aspx), but the amounts are very low and are safe for the baby. If you take high doses of certain asthma medicines, like theophylline, your baby may become irritable or have trouble sleeping. To help prevent this, take your asthma medicines 3 or 4 hours before the next feeding. Your provider and your baby’s provider can help you adjust your medicine schedule so you and your baby can get the health benefits of breastfeeding.
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