

Asthma and Tobacco Smoke

How does tobacco smoke affect people with asthma?

Asthma is a long-lasting (chronic) lung disease. It causes wheezing, coughing, shortness of breath, and chest tightness.

Asthma symptoms are caused by two different problems in the airways.

- One problem is that the muscles in the airways tighten up, which causes the feeling of chest tightness and wheezing.
- The other problem is swelling, irritation and too much mucus in the airways.

If you have asthma, symptoms often start after you are exposed to a trigger. Asthma triggers can include:

- Exercise
- Allergies, such as dust, pollen, mold, or animal fur
- Something that irritates your lungs, such as cold air, smoke, or strong smells like paint or perfume
- Medicines like aspirin or NSAIDs
- An infection such as a cold, the flu, or a sinus infection
- Strong emotions or stress
- Indigestion, also called gastroesophageal reflux disease, or GERD. If you often have problems with acid indigestion, you may have more asthma symptoms, especially at night.

Breathing second-hand smoke from tobacco, also called passive smoking, is harmful to the lungs.

Tobacco smoke irritates the airways in several ways. Smoke is made up of chemicals and very small pieces of ash that stay in the air long after the cigarette, pipe, or cigar is out. When a person with asthma breathes in these airborne chemicals and ash, it irritates the lining of the airways. This causes the muscles around the airways to squeeze tight, making it hard for the child to breathe.

People who breathe second-hand smoke often have symptoms such as coughing, wheezing and a tight feeling in the chest. Even the smell of smoke on clothes can trigger asthma symptoms in someone with sensitive airways. People with asthma should not spend any time in places where there is smoke. No one should smoke in the home, and no one should smoke in a car that a person with asthma rides in.

People with asthma who live in a household with a smoker have more breathing problems, need to take more medicines, and have more emergency room visits than people who live in smoke-free homes. If you smoke, talk with your healthcare provider or counselor about finding a way to quit. Be committed to your decision. Set a quit date and get support from friends and family. Quitting is difficult, so don't be hard on yourself if you make a mistake. Try to stick with quitting and don't give up. If you have friends or family members who smoke, one of the greatest contributions you can make to their life is to help them stop smoking.

What will help me stop smoking?

The American Lung Association gives the following tips:

1. Set a date for quitting.
2. Remove cigarettes, ashtrays, matches, and lighters from your home, workplace, and car.
3. Keep a supply of low-calorie snacks handy.
4. Spend more time in places that don't allow smoking.
5. Tell everyone you're going to stop smoking.
6. Plan what you'll do instead of smoking.
7. Call a friend if you need help.
8. Think about using nicotine replacement gum or patches. The nicotine gum or patches help you cut your craving for nicotine. You can also ask your healthcare provider for a prescription medicine, such as Zyban, to help you quit.
9. Contact the American Lung Association for help to stop smoking. The number for the national office is 212/315-8700.

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