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## Treating Breathing Issues:

Have you been told that you have asthma or prescribed an inhaler (puffer) for asthma, but never been tested?

Choosing  
Wisely  
Canada

THE COLLEGE OF  
FAMILY PHYSICIANS  
OF CANADA



LE COLLÈGE DES  
MÉDECINS DE FAMILLE  
DU CANADA

SOCIÉTÉ  
CANADIENNE DE  
THORACOLOGIE



CANADIAN  
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### What is Asthma?

Asthma is a chronic disease that affects the breathing tubes (“airways”) in the lungs. It occurs in people of all ages and is very common: almost 4 million people in Canada have asthma.

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### Asthma and other diseases can have the same symptoms.

With asthma, the lining of the airways in your lungs swells and the muscles around your airways get tight.

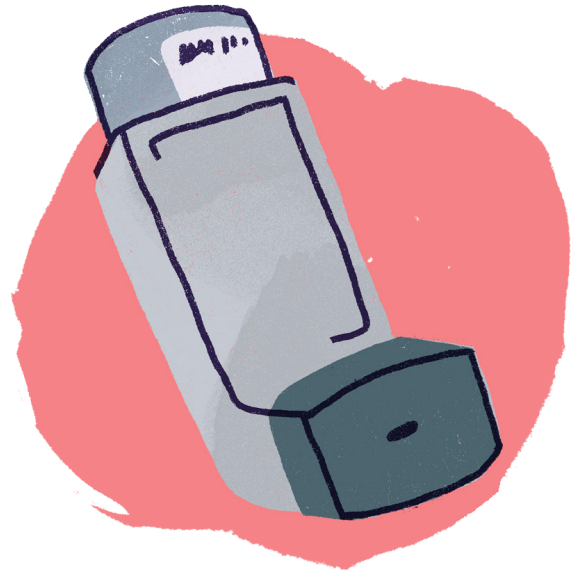
Things that can trigger asthma attacks include:

- Pollution
- Exercise
- Cold air
- Strong smells
- Allergens (something that you are allergic to)

Asthma symptoms vary from person to person, and include:

- Feeling short of breath
- Cough
- Wheeze
- Tightness in the chest

Some of these symptoms can also be caused by another condition, such as rhinitis (stuffy, runny nose), acid reflux/heartburn, emphysema (damage to the lungs usually caused by smoking), and heart disease.



Since the treatment of asthma is very different than for these other causes, it is important to know the cause of your symptoms to make sure that you get the right treatment.

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### Some people on asthma inhalers may not actually have asthma.

A [2017 study](#) found that about 1 in 4 adult Canadians who use asthma inhalers do not actually have asthma.

This means:

- They are taking inhalers that they don't actually need
- Are at risk of having side effects from those medications
- Are spending money on a potentially unnecessary treatment

All the while, the true reason for their symptoms was not being treated.

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## About Choosing Wisely Canada

Choosing Wisely Canada is the national voice for reducing unnecessary tests and treatments in health care. One of its important functions is to help clinicians and patients engage in conversations that lead to smart and effective care choices.

### How this pamphlet was created:

This brochure was created through a partnership between Choosing Wisely Canada, the College of Family Physician of Canada, and the Canadian Thoracic Society and supported by the Canadian Society of Allergy and Clinical Immunology, the Family Physicians Airway Group of Canada the Canadian Society of Internal Medicine, the Canadian Lung Association, the Canadian Society of Respiratory Therapists, Asthma Canada, COPD Canada, the Lung Health Foundation, the Alberta Health Services/Alberta Medical Association, and Respiratory Health Strategic Clinical Network (RHSCN).

This pamphlet is for you to use when talking with your health care provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this pamphlet is at your own risk.

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## Talk with your health care provider.

The best way to know for sure if you have asthma is to start with a simple breathing test called spirometry.

If the test is positive, it confirms asthma, but if it is negative, other breathing tests (including specialized asthma tests) may be required to determine the cause of your symptoms.

If you have asthma and it is not treated, you could have dangerous asthma attacks that need treatment with steroid pills or injections, and a visit to the emergency room. Over time, untreated asthma can cause permanent scarring to the airways in your lungs.

If you have been told that you have asthma and have been prescribed an asthma inhaler, but have never had a spirometry test, ask your health care provider about this test.

**Always speak with your health care provider before making any changes to your medications.**