Asthma and Allergies
Key words in plain language

Committed to Health Literacy
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Asthma and Allergies

Key words in plain language
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Introduction

This booklet gives the everyday meaning of some medical words. Many of the words and phrases used by medical people are special to work and may feel like another language to us. This booklet explains words that doctors and nurses use when they talk about asthma. It also explains words that can be found in most patient education books and leaflets about asthma.

What you will find in this booklet

This booklet is like an asthma dictionary. It may help you better understand what you hear and read about asthma and allergies.

First we describe what asthma is and how allergies can affect your asthma. Then we list words in alphabetical order. These words are often found in asthma information books. We use plain language and give the common meaning for each of these words. At the end, we list these words in groups. The back of the book has space for new words and phrases you come across and places you can call for more information.
About asthma

There is no doubt that asthma is on the increase. As many as 470,000 people in Ireland have asthma. It is important for people to take action to help control their asthma.

Diseases like asthma are known as chronic conditions, which means we have them for a long time. Asthma, like many chronic conditions, cannot be cured but can be controlled.

To understand asthma, we first have to understand some things about our breathing. Asthma is a condition that affects the airways the small tubes that carry air in and out of our lungs. These small tubes look like an upside down tree. When we breathe in, air flows:

- into our nose and mouth
- down our windpipe (trachea)
- through the air tubes (bronchi) and smaller airways, and
- into the air sacs (alveoli).
Common questions

If you have asthma, you probably have many questions.

**How will I look and feel?**

You will look and feel well most of the time. The people you live with and work with may have trouble understanding that you have a disease. Many people do not understand that some diseases are quiet and then can flare up for awhile.

**How long will this last?**

Asthma is a chronic disease. A chronic disease is with you always. It cannot be cured. **But** chronic diseases can be managed.

Asthma is not a simple disease. You cannot take a pill and make it go away. Asthma can be different for every person who has it.

**Can anything be done?**

The good news is that you can make some changes in your home, avoid some things that bring about your asthma and also get medicine to treat and manage your asthma. Your doctor may have to try a few medicines before finding the one that works best for you.
**Asthma has two parts**

When you have asthma, the lining of the tubes swell. This swelling causes the tubes to become narrow.

A sticky mucus then builds up in your airways. As the airways narrow it becomes difficult for the air to move in and out. This is why you will find it difficult to breathe and you might hear a wheezing noise.

When your asthma gets very bad and you find it hard to breathe, you experience what is called an asthma attack.

**Asthma and allergies**

An allergy occurs when our bodies come in contact with certain things (called allergens) such as a type of food, a furry or feathery animal or pollen. We may have an unusual reaction such as sneezing, a rash or itchy or watery eyes.

Some people have hayfever, which means they have an allergy or are allergic to pollen. Pollen is a tiny powder released from many plants, trees, grasses and flowers. Another name for hayfever is seasonal allergic rhinitis because it occurs during the summer.

Between 60% and 80% of people who have asthma also hayfever. This is because many of the same allergens are known to trigger them. If you have asthma, hayfever can make it worse. But if hayfever is treated effectively, it could reduce asthma symptoms and may even help prevent the onset of asthma.

Often the best way to control your symptoms is to take a preventer, nasal spray or drops with an antihistamine tablet (a medicine that provides quick relief for allergy symptoms). You can add anti-allergy eye drops and should use them regularly if you have symptoms affecting your eyes.

If you have mild to moderate asthma and also suffer from hayfever, your doctor may prescribe a medicine (called an LTRA) to control the symptoms of both conditions.
Take care and take action

When you have asthma you will learn how to control it. You can take action so you are not limited in what you can do.

1. Reduce the swelling in the airways.

You will breathe better and have fewer asthma attacks when the swelling is reduced. One kind of asthma medicine, called anti-inflammatory medicine, reduces the swelling caused by asthma. You must take this every day even if there are no symptoms of asthma. The medicines act to prevent problems before they begin. Some examples of anti-inflammatory medicines are inhaled steroids.

2. Avoid asthma triggers.

You can probably already think of many things that make your asthma worse. We call these triggers. Asthma triggers are different for different people.

Some common asthma triggers are allergens like cigarette smoke, cats, moulds, mildew or dust mites. Other common triggers are colds and flu, some of the chemicals in cleaning products, exercise, strong emotions, cold air and changes in the weather.

Cats in particular can be the cause of an allergen inside our homes. The allergens produced by a cat can stay in a house for a long time.

House dust mites are tiny and eat the flakes of skin we shed. Dust mites live in our furniture, carpets and especially our mattresses.
If you have asthma and are allergic to the house dust mite, you can often reduce asthma attacks if you manage the space you live in. Start by doing the following:

- Remove anything that is causing clutter in a bedroom.
- Use a special pillow and mattress cover, and hoover your mattress once a week.
- Use washable curtains instead of blinds.
- Make rules like no smoking or no pets in the house.

We can all help by making healthy changes in our homes, schools, places of work and our neighbourhoods. One simple thing like opening windows for at least one or two hours every day can help.

### 3. Treat asthma attacks.

People can learn how to prevent asthma attacks. Sometimes you need medicine once you feel an attack coming on. Some medicines are just for asthma attacks and make a difference right away. These medicines help the muscles in the airway relax and are called bronchodilators. Please refer to the five minute rule on www.asthmasociety.ie/resources/Asthma-Management-Approach.pdf, which contains the recommended steps to follow during an asthma attack.
Warning signs

People with asthma often check their breathing to find out how well their lungs are working. An easy tool to use is called a peak flow meter. The peak flow meter measures how fast air comes out of the lungs. As you get used to the meter, you will learn what speed is normal for you and then tell when your breathing is below normal. If you check your breathing with a peak flow meter each day, you will often be able to tell when you might have an asthma attack. You can take action then to control the attack.

People with asthma will often have some symptoms before an asthma attack. Common warning signs are:

- trouble with breathing,
- coughing,
- tightness in the chest,
- tiredness,
- sleeping problems or waking because of your symptoms, and
- nasal symptoms such as a blocked nose or sneezing.
Asthma words from A to Z

This section of the booklet is called a glossary. A glossary is made up of words and their meanings. This glossary lists words people use when they talk or write about asthma.

The words are in A to Z order. We give the meaning of the word and we use each word in a sentence.

The word in a sentence

We use made-up names in sentences as examples of how the words are used. You may notice that Yvette and Joe both have asthma. Yvette also has an allergy to pollen and Joe is allergic to cats. Each example sentence begins with a ♦.
Asthma words from A to Z
**Acute**
Quick and short term.
♦ The flu is an *acute* illness because it goes away after a short time.

**Aggravate**
To make worse.
♦ A very rainy season *aggravates* my asthma because a lot of mould begins to grow when the weather is damp.

**Airways**
The tubes that take air in from the nose and mouth to the lungs.
♦ When Louis takes a deep breath, his *airways* move air into his lungs.

**Allergen**
Something like pollen or mould that can cause the body to develop a reaction like sneezing, watery eyes or a rash.
♦ If you have asthma, an *allergen*, such as pollen may make your asthma worse.

**Allergic**
When the body reacts to something harmless it is exposed to and develops symptoms of an allergy such as sneezing, watery eyes or swelling of part of the body.
♦ Joe sneezes if a cat is nearby because he is *allergic* to cats.

**Allergic rhinitis**
Inflammation of the nasal passages (in the nose).
♦ *Allergic rhinitis* is also known as hayfever.

**Allergy**
An unusual reaction to certain things such as some kinds of food or animal or pollen. Common signs of an allergy are headaches, itchiness, sneezing or swelling of the eyes, lips or tongue.
♦ Yvette has an *allergy* to pollen and has itchy eyes in the autumn.
Alveoli

Millions of tiny air bags in the lungs. These bags fill up with air to move oxygen into the blood and carbon dioxide out.

♦ Oxygen is moved through the alveoli in my lungs to get to my blood.

Antihistamines

Medicines that provide quick relief for allergy symptoms such as sneezing, runny nose, itchy, watery eyes and itchy throats.

♦ Mary took an antihistamine to relieve her hayfever symptoms.

Anti-inflammatory

Something that reduces swelling.

♦ Louis takes anti-inflammatory medications every day to help control his asthma.

Antibiotics

Drugs used to kill or slow the growth of germs or bacteria that cause disease. A germ or bacteria is a simple living thing too small to be seen without a microscope. Some germs or bacteria cause disease.

♦ Joe took antibiotics to cure the infection in his throat.

Asthma

A condition that affects the airways, which become over-sensitive and react to things that would normally cause no problem, such as cold air or dust.

♦ People with asthma always have inflammation in the airways.

Attack

A sudden and severe worsening of an illness.

♦ When Carla had an asthma attack, she found it very hard to breathe with ease.

Breath

Air that goes in and out of the body through the nose and mouth and goes down into the lungs.

♦ Yvette fills her lungs with air when she takes a deep breath.
**Breathe**
To take air in and out of the lungs.
- Louis *breathes* through his nose unless he has a cold.

**Breathing**
Taking air in and out of the lungs.
- Joe’s *breathing* changes if someone in the room is smoking.

**Bronchial tubes**
The tubes that bring air in and out of the lungs.
- The *bronchial tubes* are found in the lungs.

**Bronchodilator**
Medicine that opens up the bronchial tubes. The medicine lets more air through by relaxing the muscle around the tubes.
- *Bronchodilator* medicine helps Carla breathe better when she has an asthma attack.

**Chronic**
Lasting a long time.
- Yvette has had a *chronic* cough for two years.

**Chronic disease**
A disease that lasts for years.
- A *chronic disease* like asthma has no cure, but it can be controlled.

**Contract**
To make smaller and shorter.
- The muscles around his airways *contract* when Louis has symptoms of asthma.

**Control**
To manage. You can control asthma by taking medications and staying away from asthma triggers.
- Louis uses an inhaler to help *control* his asthma.

**COPD**
Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease. COPD is a common lung disease that blocks the airways, making breathing difficult.
- Joe’s grandfather was told he had COPD two years ago.
Corticosteroids: One of the medicines used to treat asthma, to reduce swelling of the airways (inflammation) and to prevent attacks. Carla takes her corticosteroids to prevent asthma attacks.

Cough: To force air from the lungs with a sudden, short sound. Yvette coughs when she walks in heavy traffic because the fumes from the cars make it hard to breathe.

Cure: To make completely better by getting rid of the illness. Louis is cured of his infection. He is not coughing anymore and his energy is back to normal.

Dander: Flakes of skin shed by all animals. Many people are allergic to dander. Most cats and dogs can shed dander all over the house.

Decongestant spray: A nose spray that may be used occasionally to relieve stuffy or blocked nose. Jean uses a decongestant spray to help relieve her blocked nose.

Dilate: To become larger or open up. When Joe uses his asthma medicines, the airways in his lungs dilate and he can breathe better.

Dilator: Something that causes things to become larger or wider. A bronchodilator is a dilator that opens up the airways in the lungs.

Disease: Illness, sickness or medical condition. Asthma is a disease of the lungs.

Dust: Fine dry material that is like a powder. Dust is carried in the air. Carla wipes the dust off the window sill before she opens the window.
Easi breathe

This is a type of device that delivers reliever or preventative medicine.

♦ Dr Doyle prescribed Mary an Easi breathe inhaler to take to relieve her asthma symptoms when they get bad.

Emphysema

A chronic disease of the lung in which the air sacs become damaged and lose their ability to stretch. Air becomes trapped in the sacs and it becomes hard to breathe.

♦ Some people develop emphysema because of their work. They may be breathing in fumes and chemicals. This damages their lungs.

Environment

All living and non-living things. It also means where we live and spend our time.

♦ The environment inside my home is free of things that can trigger asthma symptoms, but the traffic outside can be a problem.

Environmental control

Action that improves the space we live in and the air we breathe.

♦ Yvette took environmental control measures when she kept the cat out of the bedroom and asked people not to smoke in her house.

Episode

A brief time in which symptoms are worse.

♦ People who are allergic to tree pollen sometimes have more asthma episodes in the spring time.

Exertion

Effort, work.

♦ Some people have asthma symptoms after a time of strong exertion such as running very fast.
**F**

We don’t have any ‘F’ words, but you might. Write your ‘F’ words here:

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**G**

We don’t have any ‘G’ words, but you might. Write your ‘G’ words here:

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**H**

**Happy wheezers**

Some children who wheeze after a chest infection but are quite well and need no medicine are known as ‘happy wheezers’.

**Hayfever**

This is a very common condition caused by an allergy to pollen, mould or spores. The nose, throat, sinus and eyes are affected. It causes a blocked nose, watery, itchy eyes and sneezing. It is also called seasonal allergic rhinitis.

♦ Some people suffer **hayfever** during the summer months.
| **Immune** | Not getting sick because your body protects itself from a disease.  
|            | ♦ Children become immune to measles if they have their vaccine. |
| **Immunity** | The body’s ability to resist an infection or disease.  
|             | ♦ Louis did not get the flu last winter because the vaccine gave him immunity. |
| **Immunotherapy** | A medical treatment that helps your body build up defences and fight off disease.  
|                  | ♦ People with very strong allergies can sometimes find relief through immunotherapy. |
| **Infect** | To spread a disease that is caused by a germ or virus.  
|             | ♦ People who handle food can easily infect others if they do not wash their hands or wear gloves. |
| **Infection** | A disease that is caused by germs or viruses.  
|              | ♦ Joe’s young children get lots of infections because colds and viruses spread easily in school. |
| **Inflame** | To get hot, red or swollen.  
|            | ♦ When Carla’s daughter touches a cat, her face becomes inflamed. |
| **Inflammation** | When part of the body is red, hot or swollen.  
|                  | ♦ Asthma medicine can reduce the inflammation of the airways. |
| **Inhale** | To breathe in.  
|             | ♦ If you are in a room with someone who is smoking, you will inhale the smoke too. |
**Inhaler**
A small device people can use to help them get their medicine to their lungs.

♦ Yvette uses her **inhaler** to bring medicine to her lungs and reduces swelling.

**Irritant**
Something that can cause soreness or sensitivity. The smell of some chemicals like chlorine bleach is an irritant for the airways of our lungs.

**J**
We don’t have any ‘J’ words, but you might. Write your ‘J’ words here:

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**K**
We don’t have any ‘K’ words, but you might. Write your ‘K’ words here:

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Leukotriene Receptor Antagonist (LTRA)

A treatment option available for people with mild to moderate asthma and seasonal allergic rhinitis.

◆ If your asthma is not well controlled by using your preventer or controller medicine regularly, your doctor may prescribe another medicine such as an LTRA as an add on therapy.

Lung function

A measure of how well the lungs are working.

◆ Louis uses a peak flow meter to check his lung function every day.

Lungs

Organs in your chest that allow your body to take in oxygen from the air. They also help remove carbon dioxide (a waste gas that can be toxic) from your body.

◆ When we breathe in, our lungs bring oxygen to the blood.

Medicine

A drug used to treat an injury or disease.

◆ Doctors prescribe medicine for people when they are sick.

Mild

Very slight or small.

◆ Joe had a mild cough.

Mildew

Tiny plants (fungus) that grow in damp warm areas. It looks like fuzz.

◆ Damp weather causes mildew and mould to grow.

Mites

Tiny animals that look like spiders. Mites cannot be seen by the eye. They often live on clothing and in bed sheets.

◆ Mites are so small that they can live on a speck of dust.

Moderate

Medium symptoms.

◆ When Yvette has moderate symptoms, she takes time to relax.
Mould
Tiny plant (fungus) that grows on food and damp surfaces. It is furry looking.
♦ You can often see spots of mould around the edge of the bathtub.

Mucous
A slimy fluid that coats and protects the inside of the nose, mouth, bronchial tubes and other parts of the body.
♦ You blow mucous out of your nose when you have a cold.

Muscle contraction
When a muscle tightens up.
♦ When Yvette has a muscle contraction, the muscles around her airways tighten up and air cannot pass through.

N
Nebuliser
A device that turns asthma medicine into mist. This mist is easy to breathe in.
♦ A nebuliser is sometimes used in an emergency situation when a person’s asthma is out of control.

O
We don’t have any ‘O’ words, but you might. Write your ‘O’ words here:
Peak flow  A measure of the fastest speed with which you can blow air out from your lungs.
♦ A high peak flow value means you are breathing well.

Peak flow meter  A small device used to measure how fast you can blow air out of your lungs.
♦ Joe uses his peak flow meter at home to manage his asthma better.

Perennial  Something that happens for a long time and keeps happening.
♦ Carla is perennially late, as she always forgets her watch.

Perennial rhinitis  Having the symptoms of hayfever all year round.
♦ Joan suffers from perennial rhinitis, so her symptoms last throughout the year.

Persistent  There all the time.
♦ This persistent cough will not go away.

Pollen  Tiny or fine powder released from a plant.
♦ Carla is allergic to pollen from cut grass in the spring.

Prescription  The written directions the doctor gives you to tell the pharmacist what type of medicine you need, how much and how often you must take it.
♦ Yvette took her prescription to the pharmacy.

Prevent  To keep from happening or to stop something before it happens.
♦ Louis can help prevent an asthma attack by staying away from cats and mould.

Preventer  A medicine taken by people with asthma to help control the swelling and inflammation of their airways.
Joan uses a **preventer** to reduce her risk of having an asthma attack.

**Preventer spray/drops**  A treatment used to prevent nose and eye symptoms from developing by suppressing the allergic reaction. Eye drops, nasal sprays and nose drops are available.

Joan took her **preventer medicine** to control her seasonal allergic rhinitis.

**Puff**  A short, gentle burst of air or medication.

Joe took a **puff** of asthma medicine from his inhaler.

**Respiratory department**  Section of the hospital where people with lung problems are cared for.

Carla goes to the **respiratory department** to have her asthma checked.

We don’t have any ‘Q’ words, but you might. Write your ‘Q’ words here:

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**Regular**  Usual, normal.

Louis has **regular** medication he takes every day and special medication for sudden attacks.
Relief
Ease or lessening from pain or discomfort.
♦ The medicine provided relief and Joe began to feel better.

Reliever
Medicine that you can take immediately to ease your asthma symptoms.
♦ Carla takes her reliever inhaler for her asthma twice a week.

Respiration
Breathing.
♦ When you have an asthma attack, respiration is difficult.

Respiratory physician
A doctor who takes care of people with lung disease.
♦ Yvette has to see her respiratory physician every three months for asthma checkups.

Respiratory therapist
Someone trained to work with people who need to improve their breathing.
♦ Yvette sees a respiratory therapist to help her monitor her lung function.

Seasonal allergic rhinitis
Another name for hayfever because it occurs in the summer season.
♦ Mary suffers from seasonal allergic rhinitis and it makes her asthma worse.

Severe
Very strong and very serious.
♦ You may have to stay in bed with a severe illness.

Shortness of breath
A problem that happens when people cannot take in or let out enough air.
♦ Louis gets shortness of breath when he climbs stairs.

Side effect
An unwanted reaction to a medicine.
♦ Some medicine can cause side effects like being tired.
Sign
Something that others (especially doctors) can see about you that shows illness.
♦ Trouble breathing can be a **sign** of asthma.

Soreness
A feeling of pain in an area of the body.
♦ The **soreness** in Louis’ muscles after he ran a marathon meant that he found walking difficult.

Spasm
Sudden, strong muscle tightening.
♦ With asthma, a **spasm** can occur when the lungs react to a trigger or allergen such as pollen.

Spacer
A spacer is a large plastic container, usually in two halves that click together. At one end there is a mouthpiece and at the other a hole for the aerosol inhaler to fit in.
♦ A **spacer** can make using your inhaler easier.

Spirometer
A machine used to measure the air that moves in and out of the lungs.
♦ Nurses in asthma clinics use the **spirometer** to measure lung function of asthma patients.

Steroids
Powerful drugs that reduce inflammation. Steroids are a group of chemicals called hormones normally made by the body. Steroids used in asthma are different from muscle-building steroids.
♦ Louis takes a special kind of **steroid** to reduce the swelling in his lungs.

Swelling
An increase in size.
♦ We could all see the **swelling** in his arm when he was stung by a bee.

Symptom
A feeling of illness that you notice.
♦ Trouble breathing can be a **symptom** of asthma.
Temporary

Short lived, only around for a short time.
❖ Joe’s trouble breathing was only temporary. Once the smoker put out the cigarette, it was OK.

Therapy

Treatment to take care of a sickness or injury.
❖ Carla took a painkiller tablet as therapy for her headache.

Treat

To give medical care.
❖ The doctor treats me with medicine.

Treatment

Action or medicine used to take care of sickness or injury.
❖ The treatment the nurse gave me helped me get better.

Trigger

Something that can bring on symptoms of asthma. Examples include exercise, colds and allergens.
❖ Cold air can be a trigger for an asthma attack.

Turbohaler

This is a type of inhaler that is a dry powder. See a picture of a turbohaler on page 36.
❖ Mary’s doctor prescribed her a turbohaler for her asthma.

Upper respiratory system

The parts of the head and neck used for breathing: the nose, throat and windpipe.
❖ Louis had problems with his upper respiratory system last winter because he had lots of colds.
V

We don’t have any ‘V’ words, but you might. Write your ‘V’ words here:

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W

Warning sign  Signals from the body that your asthma is getting worse.
♦ Shortness of breath is a warning sign of an asthma attack.

Wheeze  To breathe with difficulty making a whistling sound. People usually wheeze when their airway is tight.
♦ When Yvette wheezes, people can hear she has difficulty breathing.

We don’t have any words for the following letters, but you might write the words here:

X

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### Key words

This section groups words about asthma that are often used together and are related in some way.

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Inhalers

Below are pictures of some of the inhalers used to treat asthma.

Diskus

Easi-breathe

Metered Dose Inhaler
# Important contacts

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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National Resources

ASTHMA SOCIETY OF IRELAND

26 Mountjoy Square
Dublin 1
Te: 01 878 8511
Fax: 01 878 8128
www.asthmasociety.ie
office@asthmasociety.ie

NALA is an independent member-based organisation concerned with developing policy, advocacy, research and offering advisory services in adult literacy work in Ireland.

If you would like help with reading, writing or using numbers, call NALA on freephone 1800 20 20 65.
“The shorter and the plainer the better.”

Beatrix Potter