

Measuring asthma

Your doctor may ask you to have a **lung function test** (a breathing test) to help identify if you have asthma or work out how severe your asthma is. There are two breathing tests used for asthma – **spirometry** and **peak flow measurement**. Both measure how well your lungs are working and how much your asthma affects your breathing.

Spirometry

Spirometry is the most accurate breathing test for asthma. An instrument called a **spirometer** is used.



Doctors use spirometry to:

- help identify if you have asthma
- help work out how severe your asthma is
- see if your asthma is getting worse
- see if your asthma is improving with treatment.

Spirometry accurately measures and records the amount of air breathed into and out of the lungs. The results show how narrow the airways in your lungs are. Spirometry also helps your doctor to decide what medications to prescribe for you or whether the dose of your current medication needs to be increased or decreased.

What will I have to do for a spirometry test?

Before the spirometry test, your doctor should explain what it involves. She/he may send you to a hospital laboratory for the test, in which case the person doing the test should explain what will happen.

During a spirometry test you will be asked to:

- stand or sit up as straight as possible and blow into a mouthpiece which is part of the spirometer.
- make sure you have your mouth correctly over the mouthpiece, and then blow as hard as you can for six seconds, if possible.

The test will be repeated **three** times, if possible, in order to get the best result. You may also be asked to take some puffs from a blue reliever puffer. This will show whether medication has an effect on your airways and will help your doctor to assess the correct dose of your medication if necessary.

Once the results of the spirometry test are ready, your doctor should explain these to you.

Most adults, and many children over 7 years of age, can perform spirometry and produce reliable results.

Spirometry is strongly recommended for people with asthma.*

* See your doctor regularly for review of your asthma.

Peak flow

A **peak flow meter** gives an idea of how narrow your airways are by measuring the maximum (or peak) rate at which you can blow air into it. Peak flow helps you see how much your airways are changing, but is **not** the recommended test to identify asthma.

If you use asthma medications every day your doctor may advise you to use a peak flow meter to help you check your asthma at home. Generally children over the age of 7 are able to learn how to use a peak flow meter correctly.

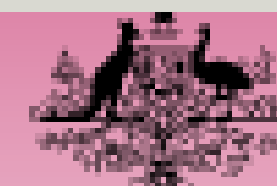
Peak flow measurement is most often used as part of a Written Asthma Action Plan, developed with your doctor, to help you recognise:

- when your asthma is getting worse, or
- when you may need to increase your medication.



A peak flow meter is only one tool available to help control your asthma – if you are feeling unwell see your doctor.

It is important to find your 'best' score by recording your peak flow scores every day for one to two weeks when you are well. This score can then be used as a guide for you and your doctor to adjust your asthma management. When your asthma is not as well controlled your peak flow score will be less than your 'best'.



Australian Government
Department of Health and Ageing

