Adults, young people and children with symptoms of asthma

Take a structured clinical history. Specifically check for:
- Wheeze, cough or breathlessness, and any daily or seasonal variation in these symptoms
- Any triggers that make symptoms worse
- A personal or family history of atopic disorders

Examine people with suspected asthma to identify expiratory polyphonic wheeze and signs of other causes of respiratory symptoms, but be aware that even if examination results are normal the person may still have asthma.

Acute symptoms at presentation

Do not use symptoms alone without an objective test to diagnose asthma
Do not use a history of atopic disorders alone to diagnose asthma

Treat people immediately and perform objective tests if the equipment is available and testing will not compromise treatment
If objective tests cannot be done immediately, carry them out when acute symptoms have been controlled and advise patients to contact their healthcare professional immediately if they become unwell while waiting to have objective tests
Be aware that the results of spirometry and FeNO tests may be affected by treatment with inhaled corticosteroids

Children under 5

- Treat symptoms based on observation and clinical judgement, and review the child on a regular basis. If they still have symptoms when they reach 5 years, see Algorithm 2 for objective tests

Do not offer the following as diagnostic tests for asthma:
- Skin prick tests to aeroallergens
- Serum total and specific IgE
- Peripheral blood eosinophil count
- Exercise challenge (to adults aged 17 and over)

Use skin prick tests to aeroallergens or specific IgE tests to identify triggers after a formal diagnosis of asthma has been made

Children and young people aged 5–16

See Algorithm 2 for objective tests

Adults aged 17 and over

Check for possible occupational asthma by asking employed people:
- Are symptoms better on days away from work?
- Are symptoms better when on holiday?
Make sure answers are recorded for later review

Refer people with suspected occupational asthma to an occupational asthma specialist

See Algorithm 3 for objective tests

FeNO = fractional exhaled nitric oxide, IgE = immunoglobulin E
Note: this algorithm is based on recommendations from NICE’s guideline on asthma: diagnosis, monitoring and chronic asthma management