

# Managing Your Asthma

## Asthma

Asthma is a breathing disorder that causes the small airways in your lungs to become inflamed or swollen. It may also lead to airway spasms. Both of these conditions narrow the airway and make it hard for you to breathe.

Asthma is chronic (lasts a long time). With the right asthma action plan and medicines, you can have an active life. The following is for both adults and children.

It is not clear why some people develop asthma. There is no cure for it. Some of the things that worsen inflamed airways and spasms are called triggers. Controlling triggers and taking your asthma medicine are two key ways to help you manage asthma and keep symptoms under control.

## Common Asthma Triggers

- tobacco smoke:
  - secondhand smoke: a mixture of smoke coming from the burning tips of cigarettes, pipes and cigars, and smoke exhaled by smokers
  - thirdhand smoke: tobacco residue that builds up many surfaces, such as clothes, carpets, curtains, furniture, and in cars
- car exhaust and other air pollutants
- cold air
- chemical sprays
- perfumes, scented deodorants and other strong odors
- allergy triggers such as animal dander, dust, mold, pollen and mites

- strong emotions
- exercise.

These and other triggers can make your asthma worse. Understanding your triggers and learning how to avoid or control them is just as important as using your medicine correctly. You need to do both to manage your asthma as well as possible.

## Asthma Medicines

There are different kinds of medicines to treat asthma. Your health care provider will determine which are best for you. Two common kinds of medicine are:

- **Controllers.** You use these daily to help prevent your airway from getting inflamed. They are also called anti-inflammatories.
- **Rescuers (relievers).** You use these when you have symptoms to keep an asthma flare-up from getting worse. You may also use rescuers to help relieve your asthma symptoms. They are also called bronchodilators.

It is important for you to always keep a supply of your rescue medicine on hand, and keep this supply up-to-date. Check the expiration date on each container.

It is a good idea to plan how you will always have the right kind of medicine available when you need it. For example, you may want to keep a supply of your controller at work as well as at home to use it on schedule.

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If you exercise at a gym, you may want to carry a supply of your reliever in your gym bag in case of a flare-up.

If you have your medicines in inhalers, be sure you know how to use them to get the most medicine into the inflamed part of your airway.

For small children, a device called a spacer/holding chamber will help them inhale their medicine. Sometimes a face mask will also be used.

## Other Ways to Manage Asthma

- **Using a peak flow meter.** Your health care provider may have you use a peak flow meter. A peak flow meter is a small hand-held device to measure how fast you can move air through your lungs. This measurement is called your peak flow and shows how well you are breathing. The meter may detect changes in your breathing before you notice any signs. It can also help determine how well your medicines are working for you.

Peak flow meters are most helpful when used correctly every day or at the first sign of an attack (flare-up). Recording your peak flows in a diary is a good way to track your breathing.

Sometimes your health care provider may also do a simple test called spirometry. This also measures how well your lungs are working by showing how fast air moves through all of your airways.

- **Following your Asthma Management Plan.** This is a plan your health care provider may create to help you manage your asthma. If your provider writes a plan for you, be sure to keep a copy of it. This plan uses your peak flow measure as a guide so you know what medicines to take from day to day. It tells you what to do when you have low peak flow readings and when to call 911 for an asthma emergency.
- **Exercising.** Exercise can help you manage your asthma. If you are fit, you are in better

physical condition to cope with an asthma flare-up.

You should not avoid exercise just because you have asthma. Regular exercise is important for your overall health.

If exercise is a trigger for you, your health care provider may need to adjust your medicine plan by adding a reliever medicine before exercise.

- **Losing weight if you are overweight.** Being overweight may cause your asthma to be worse. It can also affect how your body responds to your asthma medicines and treatments.
- **Working closely with your health care provider.** Routine appointments with your health care provider will help you stay in control of your asthma. The level of severity of your asthma may change from time to time.

For example, your asthma may improve from using controller medicines as directed. Or it may worsen if triggers are not controlled. Your provider will help you manage all levels of severity.

## When You May Need to Change Your Asthma Treatment

Call your health care provider to schedule an appointment if you:

- have had an emergency department visit or hospital stay because of asthma symptoms within the last 12 months
- have had four or more clinic visits for asthma symptoms within the last 12 months
- use your rescue medicine more than 2 days a week to relieve asthma symptoms
- are waking up at night because of asthma symptoms more than 2 times a month.

You and your health care provider will talk about any changes you may need in your asthma treatment.