

Understanding Asthma



An educational health series from



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Health**[®]

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We serve by providing the best integrated and innovative care for patients and their families; by understanding and finding cures for the diseases we research; and by educating and training the next generation of healthcare professionals to be leaders in medicine and science.

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Understanding Asthma

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What Is Asthma?

This booklet, prepared by National Jewish Health in Denver, is intended to provide information to people with asthma. Asthma is a chronic respiratory disease — sometimes worrisome and inconvenient — but a manageable condition. With proper understanding, good medical care and monitoring, you can keep asthma well controlled. That’s our treatment goal at National Jewish Health: to teach patients and families how to manage asthma, so that they can lead full and productive lives.

What Is Asthma?

If you have asthma you are not alone. In the United States, asthma affects 25 million people.

Asthma, also known as reactive airway disease, is defined as a chronic lung condition with:

- Inflammation (swelling) of the airways
- Increased sensitivity of the airways to a variety of things that make asthma worse
- Obstruction of airflow

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Typical changes in the airways include:

INFLAMMATION

Recent research has shown that inflammation of the lining of the airways is the most common feature of asthma. When they are stimulated, certain cells lining the airways release chemical substances (mediators) which lead to inflammation. This causes the airway lining to swell and narrow. The inflammation may last for weeks following an episode. Most people with asthma have some degree of inflammation all of the time. Some long-term control medications can help prevent and reduce inflammation.

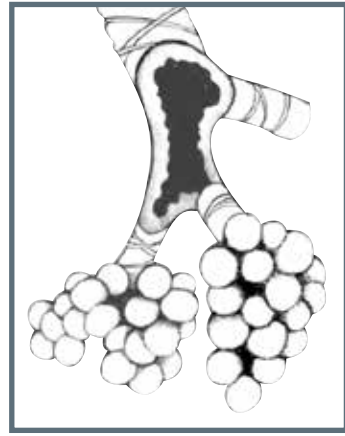
INCREASED SENSITIVITY

Another characteristic of asthma is increased sensitivity of the airways. When inflammation occurs in the airways, the airways become more sensitive. When the airways are more sensitive, you are more likely to have asthma symptoms when exposed to things that make asthma worse. When there is less inflammation, the airways are less sensitive and you are less likely to have asthma symptoms when exposed to things that make asthma worse.

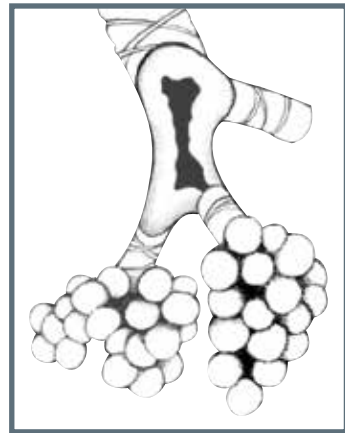
AIRWAY OBSTRUCTION

In addition to inflammation, further airway obstruction sometimes occurs with asthma. Obstruction is caused by tightening of muscles that surround the airways. This is also called bronchospasm. Bronchospasm causes further narrowing of the inflamed airways. Inhaled quick relief medications are generally very effective in reversing the bronchospasm.

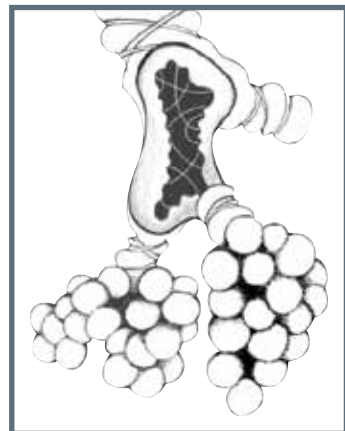
In some people with asthma, the mucus glands in the airways produce excessive, thick mucus, further obstructing the airways.



Normal Airway



Airway with inflammation



Airway with inflammation, bronchospasm, and mucus production



How Does Asthma Develop?

The cause of asthma is unknown. However, we know that people are more likely to develop asthma if a close relative has asthma or allergies. Asthma symptoms can develop at any age. The amount of difficulty a person has with asthma often changes with age, especially in the developmental years.

Most people do not experience long-term physical effects of asthma. However, chronic and poorly-controlled asthma may have a slowing effect on growth and may result in reduced lung function as an adult.

As with any chronic illness there may be an emotional impact on people with asthma. Emotions such as anger, fear, inferiority, depression and guilt may be experienced.

The first step in diagnosing asthma is a good evaluation.



How Is Asthma Diagnosed?

The first step in diagnosing asthma is a good evaluation. In many cases, a diagnosis of asthma is made based upon your history and symptoms at the time of evaluation. The family history should also be considered, as a positive family history increases a person's chances of developing asthma.

Kinds of Tests

Your doctor may have you perform a number of tests to evaluate breathing. These may include:

- Detailed medical history and physical exam
- Spirometry breathing tests
- Chest and sinus X-rays
- Skin tests

Your doctor may order other tests based on the history and physical exam.

When to Test

Many people see their family doctor or internal medicine doctor for asthma care.

You and your doctor may choose to have you seen by a specialist, such as an allergist or pulmonologist (lung specialist).

We recommend this if any one of the following occurs:

- Severe asthma episode
- Several visits to the hospital or emergency room in the last year
- Conditions that complicate asthma such as chronic sinusitis, nasal polyps or vocal cord dysfunction
- Frequent treatment with steroid tablets or syrup
- Confusion with the diagnosis
- Allergies are being considered
- Asthma seems to be getting worse
- Poor response to medicines

No matter what type of doctor you establish a partnership with to provide your asthma care, it is important to ask the following:

- What is the doctor's overall philosophy about asthma and treatment?
- Does the doctor or office staff take time to explain what is happening with you, provide education and answer your questions?
- Will the doctor work with you to develop an Asthma Action Plan to treat an asthma episode?

In evaluating your progress, remember that asthma is a chronic condition which will change in course from time to time. If you feel that you are not making progress with your current treatment, talk with your doctor about your concerns. If things are not going well, ask your doctor about seeing a specialist. You should not feel embarrassed about asking for another opinion.

Be willing to ask questions of your doctor, and don't be embarrassed to ask for another opinion.



What Are the Goals of Treatment?

You should be able to:

- Participate in activities, including physical activity without asthma symptoms,
- Sleep through the night without asthma symptoms and
- Have normal or near normal lung function,
- Have few, if any, emergency room visits and hospitalizations,
- Have few, if any, side effects from the medications taken and
- Feel good about your asthma care.

How Is Asthma Managed?

Asthma management includes:

- Learning more about your asthma,
- Identifying and controlling and/or treating things that make asthma worse,
- Medication therapy,
- Monitoring asthma and
- An action plan.

There is no cure for asthma, but you can learn to manage it so that you have a normal life. With well controlled asthma, you can often change asthma from a major disrupting factor to a relatively minor annoyance.



What Things Make Asthma Worse and How Can You Control Them?

People with asthma may have airways that are chronically inflamed. Therefore, the airways are sensitive to things that make asthma worse. These, either singly or together, cause symptoms in people with asthma. Identifying and controlling or treating things that make asthma worse, is essential to good asthma management.

Things that can make asthma worse include: irritants, allergies, exercise, infections, sinusitis, emotions, weather, gastroesophageal reflux and hormone changes. These vary from person to person.

Controlling and/or treating multiple things that make asthma worse is often needed. Avoidance of just one is often not enough.

Irritants

Many substances can irritate the nose, throat or airways. Common irritants include smoke such as tobacco smoke, smoke from wood-burning or kerosene stoves and fireplaces, aerosol sprays, strong odors, dust and air pollution. Cigarette smoke is one of the most common irritants and is a strong cause of asthma symptoms.

Actions You Can Take

- It is important that no one smokes in the home or car.
- If you smoke, try to give up smoking. Ask the doctor about techniques that are helpful.
- Always look for non-smoking sections in public areas.
- Avoid aerosol sprays, perfumes, strong cleaning products and other odor sources in the home.

Allergies

Allergies can make asthma worse, although not all people with asthma have allergies, and not all people with allergies have asthma. In people with allergies, the immune system becomes sensitive to normally harmless substances known as allergens.

Common allergens include pollens, mold spores, animal dander from feathered or furry animals, dust mites (a major component of house dust in humid climates) and cockroaches. On contact with the allergen, the allergic person's body produces chemicals that irritate the inflamed airways and lead to symptoms. Allergy symptoms may include itchy eyes, runny nose, asthma symptoms, skin problems (eczema) and/or a rash.

Depending upon your medical and family history, age and environment, allergy testing may be necessary. We recommend that testing be done under the supervision of a board certified allergist. In most cases, skin testing for allergens is preferable to blood tests. Knowing if you are allergic, and to what, can help you take appropriate measures in your home to decrease exposure to these allergens. Although many of the measures are for the entire home, your bedroom is the most important, because your bedroom is where you usually spend 1/3 to 1/2 of your time.



Many substances can irritate the nose, throat or airways. Cigarette smoke is one of the most common irritants and is a strong cause of asthma symptoms.

What Things Make Asthma Worse and How Can You Control Them?

POLLENS

Pollens from trees, shrubs, grasses and weeds can cause allergy symptoms. Pollen may travel many miles. Therefore trees, grasses and weeds in your general area can cause allergy symptoms.

Actions You Can Take

- If possible, keep windows and outside doors shut during pollen season, especially during the daytime.
- Pollen count is highest during the midday and afternoon. Consider this when planning outdoor activities.

MOLD SPORES

Mold can grow in damp areas of your home, such as the kitchen and bathroom. If you are allergic to mold, take measures to decrease mold growth.

Actions You Can Take

- In the bathroom, use an exhaust fan or open a window to remove moisture after showering. Wipe down surfaces after showering. Wash bathrooms with a mold-preventing or mold-killing solution at least once a month.
- In the kitchen, use an exhaust fan to remove water vapor when cooking. Discard spoiled foods immediately. Empty the garbage daily.
- Keep indoor moisture low. The ideal humidity is 30-40 percent.
- Use a dehumidifier in the basement if the humidity is high.
- Air conditioning can help decrease the humidity.

ANIMAL DANDER

Animal dander (dead skin that is continually shed), urine, feces and saliva from feathered or furry animals can cause allergy symptoms. Cats, dogs, birds, rodents (hamsters, gerbils) and horses are common examples of feathered or furry animals. If you do not own a feathered or furry pet, do not get one because you can develop allergies with repeated exposure.

Actions You Can Take

- Remove the animal from your home.
- If you must have a pet, keep it out of your bedroom at all times. Keep your bedroom door closed and put a filter over air vents in the bedroom.



Allergies can make asthma worse, although not all people with asthma have allergies, and not all people with allergies have asthma.

What Things Make Asthma Worse and How Can You Control Them?

- Keep the pet away from upholstered furniture and carpet as much as possible.
- Avoid visits to friends and relatives with pets when possible. Ask your doctor about using an inhaled medication before you visit a home with a pet.
- Choose a pet without fur or feathers. Snakes and fish can be good pets.

HOUSE DUST MITES

Dust mites are insects, not visible with the naked eye, that live in bedding, carpets, stuffed furniture, old clothing and stuffed toys. They feed on human dander. Dust mites are common in humid climates.

Actions You Can Take

- Enclose the mattress and box springs in a zippered dust-proof encasing. Dust-proof encasings have a layer of material that keeps the dust mites inside the encasing.
- Wash all bedding in hot (130° F) water weekly.
- Put the pillows in zippered dust proof encasings and/or wash the pillows weekly with the bedding.
- Do not use a humidifier or evaporative (swamp) cooler. Keep the indoor humidity below 50 percent.

COCKROACHES

Cockroach allergies are common in inner cities and humid areas.

Actions You Can Take

- Keep food out of the bedroom.
- Keep food and garbage in closed containers.
- Discard spoiled foods immediately. Empty the garbage daily.
- Use poison baits, boric acid or traps to control cockroaches. Keep these out of children's reach.
- If chemical sprays are used, the home should be well ventilated and you should stay away from home until the smell dissipates.



Knowing if you are allergic, and to what, can help you take appropriate measures in your home to decrease exposure to these allergens.

DEVICES FOR ALLERGY CONTROL

Air Filtration Systems

The actions described previously are first line measures to control allergy exposure. Once the first line actions are taken, air filtration systems can aid some people by decreasing exposure to allergens. The air filtration system must be carefully selected and properly maintained. Purchase such equipment only if your doctor advises that the benefits will be worth the expense.

Air Conditioning

Central or room air conditioning may reduce the number of airborne allergens by making it easier to keep windows and doors closed in hot weather. This may be helpful for people with pollen and outdoor mold allergies. Central air conditioning also has the benefit of lowering the humidity within the home. This is helpful in controlling mold and house dust mites.

Humidifiers, Vaporizers and Evaporative (Swamp) Coolers

The use of humidifiers, vaporizers and evaporative coolers are not recommended in the homes of people with asthma. All three increase the humidity level in the home creating an ideal environment for house dust mites and mold growth. If you must use any of these devices, clean them regularly.

ALLERGY SHOTS (IMMUNOTHERAPY)

If you are allergic, actions to avoid exposure are recommended whenever possible. This can be difficult if you are allergic to pollens, molds and dust mites. Allergy medications, including prescription nasal sprays and antihistamines, can help control symptoms.

If actions to avoid exposure and medications are not effective, your doctor might consider allergy shots. Allergy shots have been shown to reduce symptoms associated with pollens, certain molds, dust mites and animal dander.

Allergy shots should be given in a doctor's office, where staff is able to treat life threatening reactions. Allergy shots consist of a series of shots with solutions containing the allergens. The objective is to reduce your sensitivity, which decreases symptoms. Treatment usually begins with shots of a weak



The cause of asthma is unknown. However, we know children are more likely to develop asthma if their parents have asthma or allergies.

What Things Make Asthma Worse and How Can You Control Them?

solution given once or twice a week, with the strength gradually increasing. When the strongest dosage is reached, the shots are usually given on a monthly basis.

Allergy shots do not produce immediate results. A period of six months to one year may be required before improvement is seen. A normal course of treatment for the shots is three to five years, although some people with asthma may benefit from a longer course. Not everyone responds well to this treatment.

FOOD ALLERGIES

Food allergies rarely make asthma worse. Common food allergies include nuts, eggs, milk, seafood and peanuts. Food allergies are more common in children ages five and under. If you suspect that certain foods are causing problems, they can be removed from your diet. However, it is very important that diet changes be made only when there is strong evidence that these foods are causing problems. If food allergies are a concern, consider an evaluation by a board certified allergist. This specialist can correlate the information from a detailed diet history, allergy (skin) testing and food challenges, if needed. Because it is possible for a person to have a positive skin test to food even though it is not playing a role in causing symptoms, radical changes in diet should not be based on skin testing alone.

Exercise

Exercise can make asthma worse. Symptoms may include coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath or a feeling of chest tightness during or after exercise. Some people are not aware of these symptoms, but know that they tire easily and have a hard time keeping up. In most people, prolonged exercise (at least five minutes) is necessary to cause asthma symptoms.

Despite this, people with asthma should be encouraged to exercise. Research shows that everyone can benefit greatly from exercise — physically and in terms of self-esteem and stress relief. Walking, swimming and bike riding are only some of the activities people with asthma can enjoy.



Research shows that people with asthma can benefit from exercise.

Actions You Can Take

- If exercise makes your asthma worse, your doctor may prescribe inhaled medication, which blocks exercise-induced asthma. When taken 10-15 minutes before exercise, this “pre-treatment” is effective in preventing asthma symptoms.
- A warm-up and cool-down may also help.
- It is very important that people with exercise-induced asthma learn to pace themselves.

Obesity

Population studies have shown relationships between obesity and asthma. This includes the development and perhaps even asthma control and severity. It also is difficult to determine if a person’s trouble breathing is a result of obesity itself and/or asthma. Therefore, a treatment plan to reduce weight in obese people is encouraged to improve asthma control.

Infections

The cold and flu season can be hard for people with asthma. An upper respiratory infection, even a common cold, can make asthma worse. Viruses are the most common cause of upper respiratory infections. Antibiotics do not affect the virus or the associated inflammation. They are not usually indicated unless a bacterial infection develops.

Actions You Can Take

- Hand washing has been shown to be the most effective way to prevent the spread of common cold viruses. This can help even with close contacts in the home and workplace. Alcohol based gels are also effective.
- Influenza and other flu-like illnesses increase and prolong asthma symptoms. Your doctor may recommend a yearly influenza “flu” vaccination.

What Things Make Asthma Worse and How Can You Control Them?

- Asthma may cause atelectasis, which is the complete blockage of an airway. The area of the lung supplied by the airway receives no air at all and may collapse until the airway reopens. Atelectasis causes shadows on chest X-rays which may resemble those caused by pneumonia. Frequent atelectasis may indicate severe asthma and/or an anatomical problem. Recurrent pneumonia generally implies an underlying problem with fighting infection.

Sinusitis

Sinuses are part of the upper respiratory system. There are four groups of sinus cavities located within the bone of the skull.

Many people with asthma also have chronic sinusitis.

Sinusitis is an inflammation of the mucus membranes that line the sinus cavities. This can interfere with normal sinus drainage and cause increased mucus production. The drainage from the nose and sinuses is known as post-nasal drip.

Sinusitis can make asthma worse, especially at night. A sinus infection can also significantly worsen your asthma. This is one type of upper respiratory infection that may need treatment with an antibiotic.

Actions You Can Take

Sinus care is an important part of an overall management plan for many people with asthma. Treating the inflammation and decreasing the post-nasal drip can reduce cough and throat irritation, decreasing asthma symptoms.

Sinus Care Often Includes

- Nasal wash — A salt water or nasal saline wash helps remove mucus and bacteria from the nose and sinuses. When done routinely, this can also decrease post-nasal drip. The nasal wash should be done before using a steroid nasal spray.
- Steroid nasal spray — This helps to decrease irritation and inflammation in the nasal and sinus passages, so mucus production and swelling decreases.
- Antibiotics — An antibiotic may be recommended if a bacterial infection is present.

Emotions

Emotions do not cause asthma, but if a person has asthma, emotions can make asthma worse. Strong emotional feelings can lead to changes in breathing patterns. Simple reactions such as laughing or crying can cause asthma symptoms. Strong emotions such as anger, fear and feelings of stress can also cause asthma symptoms. However, it is important to express emotions and good asthma management can minimize the effect of emotions. If you are experiencing chronic distress or have emotional problems, it may be especially important to talk with your doctor because of their additional effect on your asthma.



There is no one type of weather which is good or bad for all people with asthma.

Weather

Many times, asthma symptoms occur with changes in the weather. However, there is no one type of climate which is good or bad for all people with asthma. Some people develop asthma symptoms on rainy days, while others have difficulty in hot, dry weather. Cold winter days may be difficult for those who are sensitive to cold air, but the winter is a time of welcome relief for those with pollen allergies.

SHOULD WE MOVE?

We do not generally recommend moving to a different part of the country to improve asthma. There is no “best” location for people with asthma to live. Sometimes relocation may seem to produce an improvement in asthma. Whether this is due to a different climate, avoidance of certain allergens or other factors is unknown. Most commonly, moving provides only temporary or no improvement, and it is very difficult to predict.

Our best advice is this: work with your doctor on understanding things that make asthma worse and on developing a management plan to keep your asthma under control. Then, if you still want to move, discuss this option with your doctor. Finally, before moving, visit the new location during all seasons of the year to “test” the area. It is important to determine if you feel better, and to see if it is good for other family members as well. Then, and only

then, should you consider moving. And remember, there is no guarantee that your asthma will improve or stay improved if it does get better.

Gastroesophageal Reflux (GER)

In some people, the muscle between the esophagus and stomach may not work well. This can allow some back flow of stomach acid into the esophagus that may cause heartburn. This acid may also cause a reflex response that can result in asthma symptoms. Asthma symptoms and heartburn, especially at night can indicate GER.

Actions You Can Take

- Elevate the head of the bed 6-8 inches, by placing blocks under the legs of the bed.
- Avoid food or liquids 2-3 hours before bedtime.
- Medications may be prescribed to help prevent GER.

Hormone Changes

Some women with asthma have increased symptoms at a particular time during their menstrual cycle, such as pre-menstruation. A woman's hormonal balance changes throughout her cycle and may cause increased asthma symptoms. If you notice your asthma becoming worse during a certain time in your cycle, talk with your doctor. Your doctor may adjust your asthma medications during that time to prevent or reduce your symptoms.

Similarly, asthma symptoms may become worse for some pregnant women. Approximately one-third of pregnant women with asthma experience a worsening of asthma symptoms which usually occurs during weeks 29-36 of pregnancy. It is important to achieve good control of your asthma during pregnancy. Many medications for asthma are safe to take while you are pregnant. Tell your obstetrician, or nurse midwife that you have asthma and review your asthma medications with them. Be sure to see your doctor regularly to monitor your asthma and for care of your unborn baby. Remember: the best way to help your baby is to care for your asthma.



Nocturnal Asthma

Worsening of asthma at night is very common. Many factors may contribute to the increased symptoms, including:

- Exposure to allergens in the bedroom, particularly dust mites
- Delayed allergic response, which may occur three to eight hours after exposure
- Chronic sinus problems and/or post-nasal drip
- Gastroesophageal reflux
- Airway cooling from a drop in body temperature at night
- Decreased effect of medications during early morning hours
- Sleep apnea — brief, repetitive cessation of breathing during sleep caused by an upper airway obstruction

Actions You Can Take

It is common to experience a worsening of asthma symptoms at night. Treatment of any underlying causes is important. Controlling allergen exposure in the bedroom, treating sinusitis and/or post-nasal drip and gastroesophageal reflux are important for managing nighttime symptoms. Your doctor may need to adjust the type and timing of medications to give extra protection during the night. Remember, you should be able to sleep through the night without asthma symptoms.

Many people experience a worsening of their asthma symptoms at night. Treatment of any underlying causes is important.



Occupational Asthma

Workplace exposure to certain chemicals or dusts can induce asthma. Some chemicals act as sensitizers, inducing allergic reactions in the airways. Once the airways become sensitized to a specific chemical, exposure to even very small amounts can make asthma worse.

Other substances, such as dusts, are airway irritants, causing symptoms in employees who have underlying asthma or who are exposed to high concentrations.

It is important to quickly recognize and control workplace exposures to increase the likelihood of completely resolving the asthma symptoms. A long-term comparison of peak flow numbers at work and away from work can help confirm the workplace association. If you suspect exposures at work are causing or contributing to your asthma, work closely with your doctor and employee health specialist to diagnose and control the exposure.

Monitoring your asthma and working with your doctor is the best way to ensure that the medication program is appropriate for you.



Medication Therapy

Asthma management has advanced significantly over the past few years. Research has allowed doctors to gain a better understanding of the role of inflammation in the airways and the cellular mechanisms involved. This has resulted in new approaches to management and new medications.

Depending on the severity of your asthma, medications can be taken on an as-needed basis or regularly to prevent or decrease breathing difficulty. Most people with asthma benefit from preventive treatment because this reduces the inflammation in the airways and the possibility of chronic obstruction. This gives ongoing protection even if there are no apparent symptoms. For many, a combination of medications is prescribed.

Many of the current medications available are inhaled. When you use the correct technique, medication is deposited directly into the airways. This generally produces fewer side effects than tablets or syrups. With some people however, oral administration (tablets or syrup) may also be prescribed.

The important thing to remember is that there is no one “best” drug regimen for everyone. The medication program must be individualized to your needs. Monitoring your asthma and working with your doctor on an ongoing basis is the best way to ensure that the medication program is appropriate for you.

On the following pages is a discussion of the medications generally prescribed for people with asthma. Most of the medications fall into two major groups:

1. Long-Term Control Medications
2. Quick-Relief Medications

Long-Term Control Medications

Long-term control medications are used daily to maintain control of asthma symptoms.

Quick-Relief Medications

Quick-relief medications are used to treat asthma symptoms or an asthma episode.

Helpful Hints for Remembering Medications

Use a daily routine for remembering your medications. Pick something you do every day such as waking up, brushing teeth, eating meals and going to bed. Plan to take your medications around that activity.

Use a medication checklist or worksheet to record when you take medications. Place the checklist someplace visible to use as a reminder.

Pack your medications in pill boxes to help you remember to take them.

Long-Term Control Medications

Long-term control medications are used daily to maintain control of asthma and prevent asthma symptoms. You must take these medications to prevent asthma symptoms even when the asthma seems better.

INHALED STEROIDS

Common inhaled steroids include:

- Flovent® (fluticasone)
- Pulmicort® (budesonide)
- QVAR® (beclomethasone)
- Asmanex® (mometasone)
- Alvesco® (ciclesonide)
- AerospaTM (flunisolide)

Inhaled steroids are long-term control medications. In addition to preventing swelling, they also reduce swelling inside the airways and may decrease mucus production. Inhaled steroids are the most effective long-term control medicine currently available. They improve asthma symptoms and lung function. They have also been shown to decrease the need for oral steroids and hospitalization.

Inhaled steroids are taken on a regular basis and cause few, if any, side effects in usual doses. Using a spacer with inhaled steroids (metered-dose-inhaler) and rinsing your mouth after inhaling the medication reduces the risk of thrush. Thrush, a possible side effect, is a yeast infection causing a white discoloration of the tongue or roof of the mouth.

LEUKOTRIENE MODIFIERS

Common leukotriene modifiers are:

- Accolate® (zafirlukast)
- Singulair® (montelukast)
- Zyflo® (zileuton)

Leukotriene modifiers are also long-term control medications. They reduce swelling inside the airways and relax smooth muscles around the airways. Leukotriene modifiers are available as tablets. They are effective at improving asthma symptoms and lung function, but not to the same extent as inhaled steroids.

INHALED STEROID AND LONG ACTING BETA-AGONIST

Common combinations of an inhaled steroid and long acting beta-agonist include:

- Advair® (fluticasone and salmeterol)
- Symbicort® (budesonide and formoterol)
- Dulera® (mometasone and formoterol)

This combination is effective at improving asthma symptoms and lung function in people with moderate to severe persistent asthma.

The inhaled steroid prevents and reduces swelling inside the airways. The long acting beta-agonist opens the airways in the lungs by relaxing smooth muscle around the airways. They last up to 12 hours. They are often used in combination with inhaled steroids as a long-term control medication to open the airways in people with moderate to severe asthma. Talk with your doctor about side effects.

IMMUNOMODULATOR

Xolair® (omalizumab) is a medication given as a shot that interferes with the function of IgE. IgE is an antibody in the immune system. IgE tells immune cells to initiate allergic reactions. This may bring on symptoms such as coughing, wheezing, nasal congestion, hives and swelling. This medication may be added to medications in people with severe persistent asthma. Talk with your doctor about side effects and special precautions to take when using this medication.

THEOPHYLLINE

Common theophyllines include:

- Uni-phyl®
- Theo-24 and others (theophylline)

Theophylline is available as a tablet, capsule, or syrup. Theophylline relaxes the smooth muscles around the airways. Theophylline is another long-term control medication. A theophylline blood level between 5-15 mcg/ml usually gives relief of symptoms while avoiding side effects. Theophylline is not one of the first medications used for long-term control of asthma. There are safer and more effective medicines available, such as inhaled steroids and leukotriene modifiers. Talk with your doctor about side effects and special precautions to take when using this medication.



Depending on the severity of your asthma, medications can be taken on an as-needed basis or regularly to prevent or decrease breathing difficulty.

Quick-Relief Medications

Quick-relief medications are used to treat asthma symptoms or an asthma episode. Quick-relief medications are not a substitute for long-term control medications.

SHORT-ACTING BETA-AGONISTS

Common inhaled beta-agonists include:

- ProAir[®], Proventil HFA[®], Ventolin HFA[®] (albuterol)
- Xopenex[®] (levalbuterol)

Short-acting beta-agonists work quickly to relieve asthma symptoms. They are quick-relief medications. Beta-agonists relax the smooth muscles around the airways. Your doctor may prescribe a beta-agonist to use as needed to relieve asthma symptoms. If you use this medicine for asthma symptoms more than twice a week talk with your doctor. Also, if you use more than one of these metered-dose inhalers a month, talk with your doctor. This is a sign that your asthma is poorly controlled and your long-term control medication may need to be adjusted.

ANTICHOLINERGICS

Atrovent[®] (ipratropium) is a quick-relief medication. Atrovent opens the airways by blocking reflexes through nerves that control the smooth muscle around the airways. It is slower-acting than the short-acting beta-agonists and can take 15-20 minutes to show a significant effect. Atrovent[®] may be useful following an inhaled beta-agonist to achieve a longer-lasting effect, especially during an asthma episode. Atrovent[®] is available in inhaled forms.

Combivent[®] is a combination medication. Albuterol and Atrovent[®] are the medications combined in Combivent[®]. DuoNeb[®] is a combination solution for the nebulizer.

STEROID PILLS

Common steroid pills and liquids include:

- Deltasone® (prednisone)
- Medrol® (methylprednisolone)
- Orapred®, Prelone®, Pediapred® (prednisolone)

Steroid pills and syrups are very effective at reducing swelling and mucus production in the airways. They also help other quick-relief medication work better. They are often necessary for treating more severe episodes of asthma.

It is important to note that the steroids used in asthma treatment are not the same as the anabolic steroids used illegally by some athletes for body building. Corticosteroids do not affect the liver or cause sterility.

Steroid pills and syrups can be used occasionally in short-term bursts, or as part of the routine treatment for people with severe asthma.

Steroid Burst

Many people with asthma periodically require a short-term burst of steroid pills or syrups to decrease the severity of asthma symptoms and prevent an emergency room visit or hospitalization. A burst may last two to seven days and may not require a gradually decreasing dosage. For others, a burst may need to continue for several weeks with a gradually decreasing dosage. You may experience a few mild side effects such as increased appetite, fluid retention, moodiness and stomach upset. These side effects are temporary and typically disappear after the medicine is stopped.

Routine Steroids

A small percentage of people with severe asthma require steroid pills or liquid as part of their ongoing treatment. It is important that your doctor prescribe a combination of long-term control medications before recommending routine steroid pills or liquid. Steroid pills or syrups alone should not be used to treat asthma!



Monitoring your asthma and working with your doctor is the best way to ensure that the medication program is appropriate for you.



d-dose inhaler can be difficult. Ask your doctor about using a spacer, which helps deliver the medication from the mouth into the airways of the lungs.

The use of long-term oral steroids can be associated with significant side effects. These may include: weight gain, fluid retention, osteoporosis, high blood pressure, cataracts, thin skin, easy bruising, muscle weakness, diabetes, or weakened immune system. Not everyone experiences these side effects, but because of the possible risk, long-term steroid pills or syrups should be continued only when absolutely necessary. We recommend that any one requiring long-term steroid pills or syrups be under the care of a specialist (allergist or pulmonologist).

Steroid pills and syrups can be taken in ways that decrease the risk of side effects. The lowest possible dosage should be used, and it is usually taken in the morning. Your doctor may prescribe long-term steroid pills or syrups every other day (every 48 hours) to decrease some side effects. Talk with your doctor about side effects and steps to prevent side effects.

Inhaled Medications

For many years, inhaled medications have been an important part of asthma treatment. Inhaled methods deliver medication directly to the airways, which is useful for lung diseases.

Aerosol devices for inhaled medications may include:

- Metered-dose inhaler
- Metered-dose inhaler with spacer
- Breath-activated metered-dose inhaler
- Dry powder inhaler
- Soft mist inhaler
- Nebulizer

Your doctor will prescribe the method that is most helpful for you.

METERED-DOSE INHALER WITH SPACER

It is crucial that you use the metered-dose inhaler correctly to get the full dosage and benefits from the medication. It is often hard to use a metered-dose inhaler correctly. At National Jewish Health, we often recommend using a spacer. A spacer is a device which can be attached to the metered-dose inhaler. A spacer helps deliver the medication to the airways of the lungs, instead of the mouth. This helps the medication work better.

Medication Therapy

Common Spacers include:

- AeroChamber®
- Vortex®

Ask your doctor about using a spacer, which helps deliver the medication from the mouth into the airways of the lungs.

DRY POWDER INHALER

Dry powder inhalers are breath activated.

When you inhale fast enough the medication is released, and inhaled.

Common dry powder inhalers include:

- Flexhaler™
- Diskus®
- Aerolizer™
- Twisthaler®

SOFT MIST INHALER

The RespiMat® is a slow moving soft mist inhaler.

NEBULIZER

A nebulizer or “breathing machine” is another way to inhale medications. A nebulizer treatment is given with an air compressor machine. Pressurized room air is used to create a mist of the medicine solution which you inhale for approximately 5-10 minutes.

When the metered-dose inhaler is used correctly with a spacer, it is as effective as the nebulizer, but you may find a nebulizer more beneficial when you have episodes of extreme breathing difficulty. Your doctor may prescribe an air compressor to take breathing treatments at home.

Whichever device you use, a metered-dose inhaler with or without a spacer, a dry powder inhaler, a soft mist inhaler or a nebulizer, you must use it correctly to get the most benefit from the medication. Your doctor may have you demonstrate inhaler techniques each visit to make sure it's done correctly.



Examples of Common Spacers

When is the metered-dose inhaler empty?

The canister of your metered-dose inhaler is marked with the number of puffs in the canister. Some metered-dose inhalers have a counter. If your metered-dose inhaler does not have a counter, date the canister of your metered-dose inhaler when you start using it. You can determine how long the medication will last. Plan ahead and get the amount of medication you need from the pharmacy.



Monitoring Your Asthma

Because asthma is a chronic condition, both you and your doctor benefit from objective monitoring of your lung condition and symptoms. This section discusses two tools — watching for asthma symptoms and peak flow monitoring. When you learn to use these tools you and your doctor can manage your asthma better.

Watching for Asthma Symptoms

Asthma symptoms can range from very mild to severe. Some people with asthma have only occasional or seasonal symptoms. Others have a more chronic form of the disease and experience symptoms weekly or daily. Some people have “asthma attacks,” in which symptoms seem to develop suddenly. In most cases, you can learn to recognize signs and symptoms, and take precautions to decrease the severity of an asthma episode. It’s important to recognize and treat even mild symptoms. This can help decrease the amount of inflammation and reduce the risk of a more serious episode.

EARLY WARNING SIGNS

Many times you receive clues that an asthma episode may be developing — before breathing difficulty begins. These clues are called early warning signs. Listed below are some common early warning signs. These early warning signs are often unique for each person. Keep track of these signs for a few weeks. It is also helpful to look back on past episodes and see if you have any of these early warning signs.

Common early warning signs include:

- Breathing changes
- Sneezing
- Moodiness
- Headache
- Runny/stuffy nose
- Cough
- Chin or throat itchiness
- Feeling tired
- Dark circles under eyes
- Trouble sleeping
- Poor tolerance for exercise
- Downward trend in peak flow numbers

ASTHMA SYMPTOMS

Asthma symptoms indicate that an asthma episode is occurring. Changes have taken place in the airways and airflow is obstructed. People with asthma experience some or all of these during an asthma episode. Action should be taken to treat these symptoms before they become worse.



It is very important to understand that you should seek medical attention (doctor’s office or emergency room) when you are not responding to treatment at home.

Asthma symptoms include:

- Coughing
- Shortness of breath
- Tightness in the chest
- Wheezing

SEVERE ASTHMA SYMPTOMS

Severe asthma symptoms can be a life threatening emergency.

Severe asthma symptoms include:

- Severe coughing, shortness of breath, tightness in the chest and/or wheezing
- Difficulty talking or concentrating
- Walking causes shortness of breath
- Breathing may be shallow and faster or slower than usual
- Hunched shoulders (posturing)
- Neck area and between or below the ribs moves inward with breathing (retractions)
- Gray or bluish tint to skin, beginning around the mouth (cyanosis)

If any of these symptoms occur, seek emergency treatment immediately. Have an action plan for getting emergency care quickly in the event of severe asthma symptoms.

Peak Flow Monitoring

In addition to watching for asthma symptoms, a peak flow meter can help you monitor your asthma. A peak flow meter can be especially useful if you have moderate to severe asthma or have difficulty identifying asthma symptoms. A peak flow meter is a small, easy-to-use instrument that measures the peak expiratory flow — how fast you blow air out. It reveals how well your lungs are working. It is important to know that peak flow numbers are effort dependent. This means you must put forth a good effort to have reliable, consistent results. Your doctor may have you demonstrate peak flow meter technique each visit to make sure it is done correctly.



A peak flow meter is a small, easy-to-use instrument that measures the peak expiratory flow — how fast you blow air out.

Monitoring Your Asthma

A daily (or regular) record of peak flow numbers can provide you with a valuable early warning sign. Sometimes peak flow numbers will decrease hours, or even a day or two, before other asthma symptoms become evident. When you monitor peak flow numbers on a daily (or regular) basis, you can identify this drop and take steps to prevent an asthma episode. The peak flow numbers, along with watching for asthma symptoms can be used to make decisions about asthma treatment.

The highest number you can blow regularly is the “personal best.” This is determined by recording peak flow numbers daily for two to three weeks when the asthma is under good control. Talk with your doctor about determining your “personal best.”

Once you know your personal best, it may be helpful for you and your doctor to establish zones. Zones will cue you about how well you are breathing and actions you should take. The zone system can be compared to the colors of a traffic light.

GREEN ZONE SIGNALS ALL CLEAR

This indicates good lung function. Follow the routine treatment plan for maintaining asthma control.

YELLOW ZONE SIGNALS CAUTION

You may need more aggressive medical management for asthma. This may include a temporary increase in quick-relief medication and inhaled steroid medications, an oral steroid burst or other medications as prescribed by your doctor.

RED ZONE SIGNALS A MEDICAL ALERT

You need immediate treatment with quick-relief medication. Notify your doctor or go to the emergency room if peak flow numbers don't return and stay in the yellow or green zone.

Your doctor can help determine what your “personal best” is and what steps you should take when the peak flow numbers are in the green, yellow or red zones.



Using an Action Plan

An action plan is a written, customized plan to help you manage asthma episodes. Your action plan is based on changes in asthma symptoms and peak flow numbers. It will give you information about when and how to use long-term control medications and quick-relief medications. If you know what to watch for and what steps to take, you will be able to make timely and appropriate decisions about managing your asthma.

It will also help you decide when to call your doctor and when to seek emergency medical care. It is very important to understand that you should seek medical attention (doctor's office or emergency room) when you are not responding to treatment at home. Emergency care in the doctor's office or emergency room may seem similar to what you were doing at home.

The difference is that you will be receiving close medical supervision. Oxygen by nasal tubing or mask may be needed. There may be repeated nebulizer treatments and simple breathing tests (spirometry or peak flows) to check response to the treatments. If breathing tests are not significantly improved, medical personnel may start an intravenous solution of medications. Steroid therapy is necessary in these episodes. Hospitalization (overnight or longer) may be required for some episodes.

A severe episode of asthma that requires such intensive treatment does not clear up right away. You will likely need to continue extra medications for a period of time. It is very important that you take medications on schedule and use the peak flow meter as instructed by your doctor.



Living with Asthma

Living with asthma is a unique and special challenge that you and your family must deal with on a daily basis. But the more you know about asthma, the better suited you are to managing the various aspects of your disease. As you take control, your quality of life will improve.

This book has taught you about things that make asthma worse, asthma medications and monitoring asthma. All of these can help you control your asthma. Be sure to talk with your doctor if you have questions or concerns about this book. Your doctor is your partner in asthma management.

Sometimes asthma can put a strain on responsibilities or relationships you may have. Asthma can impact your family, career and your finances. If asthma is causing any

problems be sure to talk with someone. Your doctor or nurse can help you find an expert to talk with. A support group where you can meet and talk to other adults with asthma may also help you cope with the challenge of asthma.

Remember, you should be able to:

- Participate in activities, including physical activity without asthma symptoms
- Sleep through the night without asthma symptoms
- Have normal or near normal lung function
- Have few, if any, emergency room visits and hospitalizations
- Have few, if any, side effects from the medications taken
- Feel good about your asthma care

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**If you would like further information
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