

## Breathe Easy Taking Control of Your Asthma



**A**sthma is a long-term condition, like diabetes, that can be controlled with medication and requires you to take an active role in your care. By working with your doctor and other members of your health care team, you can learn how to properly take medications, avoid triggers, and track your level of asthma control. When properly controlled, asthma should not interfere with your daily activities, such as walking or shopping. With successful control, you can expect to experience few symptoms.

### Symptoms of Asthma<sup>1</sup>

- 1. Coughing**
  - ▶ Often worse at night or early morning
  - ▶ Can make it hard to sleep
  - ▶ Sometimes brings up phlegm
- 2. Wheezing**
  - ▶ A whistling or squeaky sound made when you breathe
- 3. Chest tightness**
  - ▶ A feeling like someone is squeezing or sitting on your chest
- 4. Shortness of breathe**
  - ▶ Inability to catch your breath
  - ▶ Feeling like you cannot get enough air into your lungs

Different people experience different symptoms at various times. These symptoms can be mild, meaning they do not disrupt your daily activities, or severe, meaning you are unable to do the simplest of tasks without losing your breath. Severe asthma attacks can cause extreme difficulty in breathing and, if left untreated, can result in death.

### Managing Your Asthma<sup>1</sup>

- ▶ Develop an action plan with your doctor
- ▶ Avoid things that make your asthma worse (triggers)
- ▶ Learn how to use your inhalers correctly (practice at your doctor's office)
- ▶ Learn how to use a peak flow meter properly
- ▶ Take medicines as prescribed, even if your asthma is not bothering you
- ▶ Keep a record of your symptoms and peak flow results; bring them to your doctor visits
- ▶ Have regular check-ups (every 6 months) with your asthma doctor
- ▶ Let your doctor know if your medicines are not working well
- ▶ Do what your doctor recommends

### Asthma Medications<sup>1</sup>

There are two main types of asthma medications:

- 1. Quick-relief medicines**
  - ▶ Taken at the first signs of asthma symptoms
  - ▶ Should reduce symptoms and allow you to breathe easier within a few minutes
- 2. Long-term control medicines**
  - ▶ Taken daily, even if you are not experiencing symptoms
  - ▶ Helps to prevent symptoms and asthma attacks

If quick-relief medicines do not reduce symptoms within a few minutes, you should discuss this with your doctor, as a different medication may be needed. If you need to use your quick-relief

medicine on a daily basis or more than usual, your asthma may not be properly controlled and you may require a long-term control medicine.

Long-term control medicines help to prevent asthma attacks before they happen and must be taken daily for them to work properly. They take longer to work than quick-relief medicines but can reduce the need for quick-relief medicines.

Medicines include inhalers and pills that typically function to reduce the inflammation, or swelling, within your lungs and help to open up your airways to allow you to breathe easier. Steroids are a commonly used drug to reduce inflammation. These are not like the steroids that athletes take. They are safe to use and are very helpful in controlling your asthma. If you do not understand what type of medications you are taking, or are worried about taking certain medications such as steroids, please talk to your doctor.

### Types of Devices Used in Asthma Treatment

- ▶ **Inhalers:** a device that releases medicine in the form of a powder into your lungs
- ▶ **Spacers:** a chamber that attaches to your inhaler and helps you to inhale your medicine better
- ▶ **Nebulizers:** a device that provides medicine as a fine mist which is inhaled through a mask or mouthpiece
- ▶ **Peak Flow Meter:** a device that tests how well the air is moving in and out of your lungs

An important part of controlling your asthma is taking your medicine and using your inhalers, spacers, or nebulizers correctly. Use your peak flow meter in the morning to see how well your asthma is controlled, and during an attack to tell you how bad the attack is. Ask your doctor,

nurse, pharmacist, or respiratory therapist to teach you how to use these devices correctly. Then demonstrate it back to him or her in order to make sure you are doing it right.

### Asthma Action Plan

You and your doctor should develop an Asthma Action Plan together. The action plan typically contains a list of medications you are taking, including what kinds of medicines you should take in different scenarios, how much you should take and when to take them. Additionally, the action plan should include instructions on what to do if your symptoms worsen and when you should call your doctor or go to the emergency room. Keep your action plan handy at all times and take it with you when you visit your doctor or go to the ER. An example of an Asthma Action Plan can be found on the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute's web site here: [http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/lung/asthma/actionplan\\_text.htm](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/lung/asthma/actionplan_text.htm).

### Determining How Well Your Asthma Is Controlled

By using the chart below, you can get a general idea of how controlled your asthma is. As part of your Asthma Action Plan, your doctor should provide instructions on what medications to take and how to take them depending on the level of control.

How am I doing?	
Level of Control	Symptoms
Asthma Under Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No coughing, wheezing, or chest tightness</li> <li>No shortness of breath during day or night</li> <li>Can do usual activities</li> </ul>
Asthma Getting Worse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coughing, wheezing, and tightness in chest</li> <li>Shortness of breath</li> <li>Can do some, but not all, activities</li> <li>Need to use your inhalers more often</li> </ul>
Time to Call the Doctor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Very short of breath</li> <li>Quick relief inhalers not helping</li> <li>Cannot do usual activities</li> <li>Wheezing, coughing and shortness of breath have lasted more than 24 hours</li> </ul>
Danger Signs (Get to Emergency Room)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Trouble walking or talking due to shortness of breath</li> <li>Lips or fingernails turn blue</li> </ul>

Table 1. Measures of Asthma Control.

### Avoiding Triggers

Triggers are anything that can make your asthma symptoms worse and even cause an asthma attack. Different people are bothered by different triggers, so it is important to write down anything that makes your symptoms worse and discuss them with your doctor. The table below provides a list of common triggers and solutions to minimize or eliminate them.

Things That Can Make Your Asthma Worse	
Triggers	Solutions
Furry or feathered animals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Keep pets out of the house</li> <li>Keep pets out of bedrooms and sleeping areas</li> <li>Keep pets away from carpets and cloth-covered furniture</li> </ul>
Cockroaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Keep food and garbage in closed containers</li> <li>Use baits, powders, or pastes to kill cockroaches</li> <li>If a spray is used to kill cockroaches, stay out of the area until the odor goes away</li> </ul>
Dust mites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Put pillows and mattresses in dust-proof covers</li> <li>Wash pillows, sheets, and blankets in hot water every week</li> <li>Keep humidity low in the house with dehumidifier or A/C</li> <li>Remove carpets if possible</li> </ul>
Pollen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Keep windows closed</li> <li>Stay indoors during late morning to afternoon when pollen counts are high or during pollen season</li> </ul>
Tobacco Smoke	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do not smoke in closed areas (eg, car or home)</li> <li>Quit smoking (ask your doctor for help quitting)</li> </ul>
Vacuum Cleaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Try to get someone else to vacuum for you</li> <li>Use a dust mask if you must vacuum</li> </ul>
Strong Odors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stay away from strong perfumes, hair spray, paints, and talcum powder</li> <li>Do not use fireplace or wood-burning stove</li> </ul>
Indoor Mold	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fix leaky faucets or pipes</li> <li>Clean moldy surfaces with cleaners that have bleach in them</li> </ul>
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Avoid foods and beverages such as beer, wine, dried fruit, shrimp</li> <li>In cold weather use a scarf to cover nose and mouth</li> <li>Avoid medicines such as cold medicines, vitamins, aspirin (talk to your doctor about any medicines you take—either prescribed or bought over-the-counter)</li> </ul>

Table 2. Avoiding Triggers of Asthma Symptoms

### Conclusions

Asthma is a life-long condition that can be controlled with medicines and avoidance of triggers. By working with your doctor and other members of your health care team, you can get your asthma under control and continue doing the activities you love to do. It is important to follow your doctor's recommendations and take your medicines as prescribed, even if you are not experiencing any symptoms. If you are unsure about how to take your medications or what the doctor is recommending you do, be sure to ask questions and let him or her know you do not understand what is being said. It is your health and understanding how to manage your asthma will reduce the occurrence of symptoms and attacks.

### Reference

1. National Heart Lung and Blood Institute. *So You Have Asthma*. Bethesda, MD: National Institutes of Health, US Dept of Health and Human Services; 2007. NIH Publication 07-5248. [http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/lung/asthma/have\\_asthma.pdf](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/lung/asthma/have_asthma.pdf). Accessed 01/10/13.