

ASTHMA

What you need to know

What is asthma?

Asthma is a condition that usually causes symptoms over a prolonged period - that is why it is referred to as a chronic disease. Asthma can't be cured, but it can be managed and with appropriate treatment it should not alter the quality of life of people who have it. In fact, most guidelines for the treatment of asthma highlight effective control of this condition as the most important goal. Thus, with proper treatment, people with asthma can lead normal, active lives.



All people with asthma must achieve these goals once diagnosed with asthma and started on treatment. It is unacceptable to have ongoing symptoms if you are on treatment. If you do experience asthma symptoms and you are on treatment you must bring this to the attention of your doctor so that your treatment can be adjusted and symptoms addressed.

The goals of asthma treatment

1. To be completely free of any asthma symptoms i.e. cough, wheeze and breathlessness
2. To attend school/work regularly and participate fully in all school/sporting activities
3. To have restful sleep – free from night-time cough and/ or wheeze
4. To minimize the number of asthma attacks
5. To avoid hospital admissions

How can these goals be achieved?

1. Take your medication as prescribed by your doctor
2. Understand what the different treatments should be doing for you
3. Know how to correctly use the device that delivers your medication
4. Learn how to monitor your symptoms
5. Know how to recognise deteriorating symptoms
6. Have – and use – an action plan when symptoms change/deteriorate
7. Know what to do when symptoms deteriorate
8. Keep in touch with your doctor

Why do asthma symptoms develop?

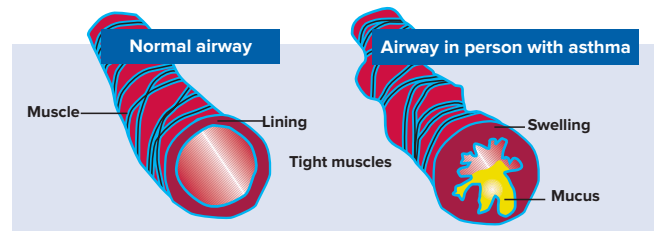
If you have asthma, your airways are extra sensitive. When you are around certain things that “set off” your asthma, this is what can happen:

Your airways becomes “twitchy” and go into spasm.

The muscles around your airways squeeze together and tighten.

This makes your airways narrow, leaving less room for the air to pass through and breathing becomes difficult.

The more red and swollen your airways are i.e. the more inflamed they are, the more twitchy they become.



Your airways becomes red and swollen.

They get inflamed and they fill up with mucus. The swelling and mucus (inflammation) make your airways narrower and as it's harder for the air to pass through making breathing difficult.

What “sets off” asthma symptoms?

Many different things can set off your asthma symptoms. Each person with asthma has his/her own set of asthma inducers and asthma triggers.

Asthma inducers:

If you breathe in something you are allergic to i.e. dust or pollen - or if you have a viral infection i.e. a cold or flu - your airways can become inflamed.

Asthma triggers:

If you breathe in an asthma trigger i.e. cold air or smoke, or if you exercise, the muscles around your airways can go into spasm and squeeze together tightly causing bronchospasm.

It's important for every person with asthma to know what their triggers and inducers are, so they can try to avoid them. But, if you are on the right medication you should be able to be symptom free - even in the presence of asthma triggers and inducers.

About asthma medications

One of the most important concepts to understand about asthma is that most asthmatics will need prescribed treatment on a regular basis. This “preventative” approach is aimed at treating the inflammation in the airways and actually prevents symptoms and so helps to achieve the “Goals of Asthma Treatment”. Asthma medications act by preventing or controlling asthma and they have to be taken every day - even when symptoms are under control - just like people with other chronic conditions such as high blood pressure or diabetes or epilepsy have to take their medications every day to stay well.

There are two main types of medications used in the treatment of asthma – controllers and relievers.

Controllers (usually an inhaled corticosteroid) work by reducing the swelling and mucus (inflammation) in the airways. They act slowly and work over the long-term. They are an extremely important component in the treatment of asthma as they treat the underlying cause of asthma – the inflammation in the lungs. Regular use ultimately brings control of asthma symptoms and reduce the risk of asthma attacks.

Controllers WON'T help right away in an asthma attack

It is important to use a controller every day, as prescribed by your doctor - even in the absence of any symptoms. If a controller is used on a regular daily basis, asthma symptoms will be less and may even disappear.

If you take controller medicine as directed:

- Asthma will be better controlled
- Asthma attacks can be prevented
- Reliever medicine will not be needed so often
- Reliever medicine will work better and faster, because the lungs will be in better shape

Some people think they can skip the controller medicine and only use the reliever medicine. This is dangerous. If you've been prescribed a controller medicine, use it. The reliever medicine by itself won't control your asthma as it cannot do anything to reduce the swelling and mucus which is actually the underlying cause of asthma.

Side effects of inhaled corticosteroids: For a full list of side effects, refer to the package insert. In most cases, inhaled corticosteroids, have few side effects with the dose needed to control asthma. Most side effects happen in the throat and get better with time and can also be prevented or treated easily:

- Hoarseness and sore throat
- Thrush or yeast infection (looks like a whitish layer on your tongue)

You can treat or prevent these side effects by rinsing your mouth, gargling and spitting out the water after you take an inhalation.

Relievers produce instant relief

Relievers help open the airways by relaxing the muscles that tighten around the airways. They relieve bronchospasm which causes asthma symptoms such as cough, wheeze and tight chest. For this reason relievers are also used as “first aid” treatment for asthma symptoms or attacks. Always carry them with you! Relievers have no effect on the swelling and mucus (inflammation) in the airways but they can be used to indicate the severity of the inflammation in the lungs. The more frequently a reliever is needed, the worse the inflammation in the lungs can be assumed to be.

Relievers help during asthma attacks - take it right away

Relievers reduce the effects of asthma triggers like exercise and cold air. Relievers make your tight airway muscles relax and help you breathe easier. Relievers are taken when you need them – only when you have symptoms. Relievers can also sometimes be taken before exercising. It's important you keep your reliever medicine close by, so it's there when you need it.

If your asthma is under control you will not need to use a reliever more than 3 times per week. If you do require it more than this, it is an indication that the inflammation in the lungs is worsening and that more controller medication is required. It is also an indication that a doctor should check and re-evaluate the asthma treatment.

Ask your doctor about the SMART way to treat asthma

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