

Asthma

A GUIDE FOR PATIENTS

Asthma is a chronic lung condition that can develop at any age. People with asthma have extra sensitive airways. The airways react by narrowing or obstructing when they become irritated. This makes it difficult for the air to move in and out. This narrowing or obstruction can cause one or a combination of the following symptoms:

- wheezing
- coughing
- shortness of breath
- chest tightness

If you've just been diagnosed with asthma, you may feel dismayed. However, with proper management and medication, you, like many other people with asthma, can live a perfectly normal and active life.

Controlling Your Asthma

Your doctor and/or asthma educator can help you control your asthma symptoms. But there's also a lot you can do on your own. By following your doctor and/or asthma educator's advice, and by avoiding your personal triggers, you can take control of your asthma and its symptoms. Much of asthma management is a matter of simple lifestyle modification.

1. Know and Avoid your Personal Asthma Triggers

Asthma attacks are often brought on by triggers. A trigger is any thing or condition that causes you to have an asthma episode. Your personal triggers can be very different from those of another person with asthma. In any case, it's important to avoid personal triggers in order to keep airway inflammation to a minimum and reduce the symptoms. Some common triggers include:

- Dust mites
- Animals
- Cockroaches
- Molds
- Pollens
- Viral infections
- Exercise
- Cold air
- Certain food additives like sulfites
- Intense emotions
- Certain air pollutants (smoke, chemical fumes, perfumes & other strong smelling substances)

If you have an animal in your home and your family doctor or allergist determines that it is a trigger for your symptoms, it is highly recommended that you remove the animal from your home. Removing the pet from the home is the single most effective way to control asthma. If you can't remove an animal from your home, you will be increasing your risk for more severe asthma. To minimize the effects on your asthma:

- Have someone else wash your pet twice a week
- Remove carpeting in the home, especially in the bedroom.
- Clean the house frequently, especially your bedroom, with a vacuum equipped with a high-efficiency particulate air filter (HEPA), or a central vacuum system with an outdoor exhaust.
- Encase your mattress and pillows in special allergen-proof covers.
- Keep your animal out of your bedroom, off upholstered furniture, and away from carpets and other soft surfaces where allergens can accumulate.
- Use a HEPA air cleaner in your bedroom.

2. Use Your Asthma Medications Properly

Medications can be very effective at keeping your asthma under control. Most people with asthma take two kinds of medication:

Corticosteroids, often called “controllers” or “preventers”, are used to reduce inflammation in the airways. Controllers should be taken every day, whether or not you’re experiencing symptoms.

Bronchodilators, often called “relievers” or “rescuers”, are used to alleviate temporary breathing problems due to the constriction in the bronchial tubes provoked by triggers. They are very good at helping to alleviate symptoms immediately, but do nothing for the underlying problem and are only a short-term solution. Tell your doctor if you are using your reliever medicine (e.g. your “puffer”) more than 4 times a week, as excessive use of relievers indicates that you may need to have your medication adjusted.

3. Take Charge of your Asthma

The best way to manage your asthma is to be actively involved in your own treatment:

- Take your medications as directed by your doctor. Incorrect use of asthma medication can result in poor asthma control.
- Develop an asthma “action plan” with your doctor to help you understand what to do everyday, if your asthma gets worse, and for emergencies.
- Stay away from the environmental triggers that can cause you to have asthma attacks.
- Keep an asthma “diary” to monitor and record your level of asthma control and share it with your doctor and/or asthma educator.
- Bring your inhaler to your doctor or your pharmacist to check how well you are using the device.

Web Resources for People with Asthma

The following web sites provide some reliable information about asthma.

The B.C. Chronic Disease Management Web site provides patient information and resources on asthma and other common chronic illnesses. (<http://www.healthservices.gov.bc.ca/cdm/patients/index.html>)

The BC HealthGuide OnLine has a world of health information just a click away, through the award-winning Healthwise Knowledgebase®. Detailed information about asthma and other chronic diseases is available here. (<http://www.bchealthguide.org/kbaltindex.asp>). Or you can call the BC NurseLine for advice and information any time day or night at 604 215-4700 (Greater Vancouver) or 1-866-215-4700 (toll free) if outside the lower Mainland.

The Asthma Society of Canada, established in 1974, is a national registered charity that focuses solely and comprehensively on asthma education and research, and has a long history of providing unbiased, credible information on asthma. (<http://www.asthma.ca/adults/>) or phone 1-800-787-3880 (toll free).

The Asthma In Canada Web site contains excellent information on asthma, including a Patient Self-Assessment Form. (<http://www.asthmaincanada.com/>)

The British Columbia Lung Association has an excellent site that includes information on asthma programs and education resources available in B.C. (<http://www.bc.lung.ca/>) or contact them at by phone at: 604 731-5864, or 1-800-665-5864 (toll free) if outside the Lower Mainland.