Asthma Attacks, Prevention

HOW CAN ASTHMA BE PREVENTED?

Currently, there is no way to prevent asthma from starting. However, you can take steps to control the disease and prevent its symptoms after you have been diagnosed. Learn about your asthma and how to control it. Take an active role to control your asthma by working with your caregiver to create and follow an asthma action plan. An asthma action plan guides you in taking your medicines properly, avoiding factors that make your asthma worse, tracking your level of asthma control, responding to worsening asthma, and seeking emergency care when needed. To track your asthma, keep records of your symptoms, check your peak flow number using a peak flow meter (*handheld device that shows how well air moves out of your lungs*), and get regular asthma checkups.

Other ways to prevent asthma attacks include:

- Use medicines as your caregiver directs.
- Identify and avoid things that make your asthma worse (as much as you can).
- Keep track of your asthma symptoms and level of control.
- Get regular checkups for your asthma.
- With your caregiver, write a detailed plan for taking medicines and managing an asthma attack. Then be sure to follow your action plan. Asthma is an ongoing condition that needs regular monitoring and treatment.
- Identify and avoid asthma triggers. A number of outdoor allergens and irritants (pollen, mold, cold air, air pollution) can trigger asthma attacks. Find out what causes or makes your asthma worse, and take steps to avoid those triggers (see below).
- Monitor your breathing. Learn to recognize warning signs of an attack, such as slight coughing, wheezing or shortness of breath. However, your lung function may already decrease before you notice any signs or symptoms, so regularly measure and record your peak airflow with a home peak flow meter.
- Identify and treat attacks early. If you act quickly, you're less likely to have a severe attack. You will also need less medicine to control your symptoms. When your peak flow measurements decrease and alert you to an upcoming attack, take your medicine as instructed, and immediately stop any activity that may have triggered the attack. If your symptoms do not improve, get medical help.
- Pay attention to increasing quick-relief inhaler use. If you find yourself relying on your quick-relief inhaler (such as albuterol), your asthma is not under control. See your caregiver about adjusting your treatment.

IDENTIFY AND CONTROL FACTORS THAT MAKE YOUR ASTHMA WORSE

A number of common things can set off or make your asthma symptoms worse (*asthma triggers*). Keep track of your asthma symptoms for several weeks, detailing all the environmental and emotional factors that are linked with your asthma. When you have an asthma attack, go back to your asthma diary to see which factor, or combination of factors, might have contributed to it. Once you know what these factors are, you can take steps to control many of them.

Allergies: If you have allergies and asthma, it is important to take asthma prevention steps at home. Asthma attacks (*worsening of asthma symptoms*) can be triggered by allergies, which can cause temporary increased inflammation of your airways. Minimizing contact with the substance to which you are allergic will help prevent an asthma attack.

Animal Dander:

- Some people are allergic to the flakes of skin or dried saliva from animals with fur or feathers. Keep these pets out of your home.
- If you can't keep a pet outdoors, keep the pet out of your bedroom and other sleeping areas at all times, and keep the door closed.
- Remove carpets and furniture covered with cloth from your home. If that is not possible, keep the pet away

from fabric-covered furniture and carpets.

Dust Mites:

- Many people with asthma are allergic to dust mites. Dust mites are tiny bugs that are found in every home, in mattresses, pillows, carpets, fabric-covered furniture, bedcovers, clothes, stuffed toys, fabric, and other fabric-covered items.
- Cover your mattress in a special dust-proof cover.
- Cover your pillow in a special dust-proof cover, or wash the pillow each week in hot water. Water must be hotter than 130º F to kill dust mites. Cold or warm water used with detergent and bleach can also be effective.
- Wash the sheets and blankets on your bed each week in hot water.
- Try not to sleep or lie on cloth-covered cushions.
- Call ahead when traveling and ask for a smoke-free hotel room. Bring your own bedding and pillows, in case the hotel only supplies feather pillows and down comforters, which may contain dust mites and cause asthma symptoms.
- Remove carpets from your bedroom and those laid on concrete, if you can.
- Keep stuffed toys out of the bed, or wash the toys weekly in hot water or cooler water with detergent and bleach.

Cockroaches:

- Many people with asthma are allergic to the droppings and remains of cockroaches.
- Keep food and garbage in closed containers. Never leave food out.
- Use poison baits, traps, powders, gels, or paste (for example, boric acid).
- If a spray is used to kill cockroaches, stay out of the room until the odor goes away.

Indoor Mold:

- Fix leaky faucets, pipes, or other sources of water that have mold around them.
- Clean moldy surfaces with a cleaner that has bleach in it.

Pollen and Outdoor Mold:

- When pollen or mold spore counts are high, try to keep your windows closed.
- Stay indoors with windows closed from late morning to afternoon, if you can. Pollen and some mold spore counts are highest at that time.
- Ask your caregiver whether you need to take or increase anti-inflammatory medicine before your allergy season starts.

Irritants:

- Tobacco smoke is an irritant. If you smoke, ask your caregiver how you can quit. Ask family members to quit smoking, too. Do not allow smoking in your home or car.
- If possible, do not use a wood-burning stove, kerosene heater, or fireplace. Minimize exposure to all sources of smoke, including incense, candles, fires, and fireworks.
- Try to stay away from strong odors and sprays, such as perfume, talcum powder, hair spray, and paints.
- Decrease humidity in your home and use an indoor air cleaning device. Reduce indoor humidity to below 60 percent. Dehumidifiers or central air conditioners can do this.
- Try to have someone else vacuum for you once or twice a week, if you can. Stay out of rooms while they are being vacuumed and for a short while afterward.
- If you vacuum, use a dust mask from a hardware store, a double-layered or microfilter vacuum cleaner bag, or a vacuum cleaner with a HEPA filter.
- Sulfites in foods and beverages can be irritants. Do not drink beer or wine, or eat dried fruit, processed potatoes, or shrimp if they cause asthma symptoms.
- Cold air can trigger an asthma attack. Cover your nose and mouth with a scarf on cold or windy days.
- Several health conditions can make asthma more difficult to manage, including runny nose, sinus infections, reflux disease, psychological stress, and sleep apnea. Your caregiver will treat these conditions, as well.
- Avoid close contact with people who have a cold or the flu, since your asthma symptoms may get worse if you catch the infection from them. Wash your hands thoroughly after touching items that may have been handled by people with a respiratory infection.

- Get a flu shot every year to protect against the flu virus, which often makes asthma worse for days or weeks. Also get a pneumonia shot once every five to 10 years.

Drugs:

- Aspirin and other painkillers can cause asthma attacks. 10% to 20% of people with asthma have sensitivity to aspirin or a group of painkillers called non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDS), such as ibuprofen and naproxen. These drugs are used to treat pain and reduce fevers. Asthma attacks caused by any of these medicines can be severe and even fatal. These drugs must be avoided in people who have known aspirin sensitive asthma. Products with acetaminophen are considered safe for people who have asthma. It is important that people with aspirin sensitivity read labels of all over-the-counter drugs used to treat pain, colds, coughs, and fever.
- Beta blockers and ACE inhibitors are other drugs which you should discuss with your caregiver, in relation to your asthma.

ALLERGY SKIN TESTING

Ask your asthma caregiver about allergy skin testing or blood testing (RAST test) to identify the allergens to which you are sensitive. If you are found to have allergies, allergy shots (immunotherapy) for asthma may help prevent future allergies and asthma. With allergy shots, small doses of allergens (substances to which you are allergic) are injected under your skin on a regular schedule. Over a period of time, your body may become used to the allergen and less responsive with asthma symptoms. You can also take measures to minimize your exposure to those allergens.

EXERCISE

If you have exercise-induced asthma, or are planning vigorous exercise, or exercise in cold, humid, or dry environments, prevent exercise-induced asthma by following your caregiver's advice regarding asthma treatment before exercising.

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