



# Asthma Outlook

STAYING HEALTHY ■ LIVING WELL

SUMMER 2009

## Camping Out with Asthma

Going camping? You can still enjoy the great outdoors when you have asthma, but taking a few precautions may help you breathe easier. Here are some asthma-friendly camping tips:

**Air out your tent before you go.** It might harbor mold, a common trigger for asthma symptoms. Scrub away mold using a cleaner with bleach. Ask someone to do it for you if you are sensitive to bleach.

**Pick out your campsite carefully.** If dust makes it harder to breathe, pitch your tent in a grassy spot—unless you're allergic to grass pollen, in which case you might choose a sandy site.

**Let a friend toast your marshmallow.** Smoke irritates the airways, which can worsen asthma. Sit in the direction opposite from where the campfire smoke is blowing.

**Don't leave home without your first aid kit.** In addition to your asthma medications, you may want to pack an antihistamine for allergies and a steroid skin cream for allergic rashes. If you're highly allergic to stinging insects or specific foods, you may also need to carry injectable epinephrine in case of an emergency. With a little extra planning, you can be a happy camper.



### Does Breast-Feeding Reduce the Risk for Asthma?

Some studies have found that breast-feeding reduces the risk for asthma. Others have found no effect or an increased risk, especially as children who were breast-fed grow older. More research is needed, although the American Academy of Pediatrics reports that breast-feeding has numerous other health benefits for babies.

One benefit is protection against infectious diseases. Breast milk contains antibodies—molecules made by the immune system to lock on to and destroy specific germs. Breast-feeding for at least six months helps prevent respiratory infections, which are common triggers of childhood asthma.

Besides that, breast milk contains the right amount of nutrients babies need for healthy growth and development. It is easier than formula for most babies to digest. Breast-feeding also saves time and money, uses up extra calories, and helps the uterus get back in shape more quickly. All in all, experts say, breast milk is the best milk for babies.

## Good Health Guidelines

For people with asthma, it's important to make sure the following tests and vaccines are kept current:

- A spirometry test
- A flu vaccine

Be sure to talk with your doctor about these topics:

- Writing an asthma Action Plan
- Using a peak-flow meter
- Keeping a 30-day supply of asthma medications on hand
- Quitting smoking

### A CLOSER LOOK

#### The Asthma Action Plan

An asthma Action Plan is a written set of instructions you and your doctor develop together. Your plan should spell out:

- How to avoid your personal asthma triggers
- When and how to take your asthma medicine
- How to interpret your peak-flow readings and symptoms
- What to do if you have an asthma attack
- When and at what number to call your doctor
- When to go to the emergency room or call 911

If anything in your Action Plan is unclear, ask your doctor to explain it. Then periodically review the plan with him or her to keep it up-to-date. No matter how good the plan is, it's only helpful if you know how to use it properly.

*Although these are suggested guidelines for care, please check with your benefits plan for coverage.*

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## SET YOUR CHILD UP FOR Good Asthma Control

What's your attitude toward asthma? Your beliefs and how you act on them can have a powerful effect on your child's asthma. That's the finding of a recent study in the journal *Pediatrics*. In the study, parents with low expectations for asthma treatment were more likely to have kids whose asthma was not well-controlled. And parents who believed frequent symptoms were OK were more likely to have kids who underused their medication.

Other findings have shown that the opposite is also true: Positive beliefs can have helpful results. One study in *Pediatrics* showed that parents who believed strongly in the need for asthma medication were more likely to have kids who took their daily medication as prescribed.

### The Power of a Positive Attitude

Simply put, your beliefs affect your decisions and actions. You can set your child up for good asthma control by learning why treatment is needed and what it can do. The more you believe that daily medication matters, the more likely you'll make sure your child takes the medication as prescribed by his or her doctor. Try setting up a calendar so you don't forget it. Because young children depend on you to act on their behalf, your beliefs directly affect them, too.



### Start with the Basics

There's a lot to learn about asthma. Here are some essential facts to reinforce your positive outlook on asthma treatment:

- Although asthma can't be cured, it can almost always be controlled with proper treatment.
- One key to good asthma control is medication. All kids with asthma need a rescue medication, which is taken for quick relief when symptoms flare up. Many also need a controller medication, which

is taken every day to help keep symptoms from starting in the first place.

- When asthma is well-controlled, kids don't miss as much school and aren't sidelined from sports. Children (and their parents) aren't as likely to be kept awake at night by asthma symptoms.

When you understand the importance of these keys to asthma care, you'll have an easier time helping your child achieve good asthma control.

## Are Your MEDICATIONS WORKING?

The National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute notes that medications are the cornerstone of asthma treatment. How can you tell if yours are working? The information below outlines what to expect from your medications and when to discuss concerns with your doctor.

### Rescue Medications

Everyone with asthma needs a rescue medication, which provides fast relief when asthma symptoms flare up. This type of medication is used as needed at the first sign of symptoms. Your doctor might recommend using it at other times, too, such as before exercise.

**What to expect.** Your rescue medication should relieve your symptoms and improve your breathing quickly. Your doctor will tell you exactly how to use it based on your individual needs. After taking your rescue medication your:

- Asthma symptoms—such as coughing, wheezing, chest tightness, or shortness of breath—should go away or greatly improve.
- Peak flow—a measure of how well your lungs are functioning—should return to 80 percent or more of your personal best. (Peak flow is measured by blowing into a handheld device called a peak-flow meter. Your doctor can help you determine in advance what number to aim for.)

**When to seek help.** After taking your rescue medication as directed and giving it the allotted time to work, call your doctor if:

- You continue having symptoms
- Your peak flow remains below 80 percent of your personal best



In some cases, you should call your doctor or seek emergency help as soon as you take your rescue medication without waiting to see how it works. Call immediately if:

- You are very short of breath or unable to carry out your usual activities
- Your peak flow falls below 50 percent of your personal best. (Your doctor can help you determine in advance what number to watch for.)

## Use Self-Affirmation to Change



- You have trouble walking or talking, or your lips or fingernails turn blue

### Controller Medication

Most people with asthma also need a controller medication, which reduces the airway inflammation that leads to asthma symptoms. This type of medication is taken daily over a long period. The goal is to help prevent asthma flare-ups from starting in the first place.

**What to expect.** To do its job well, a controller medication must be used regularly, even during symptom-free periods. People who take this type of medication every day usually find that it greatly reduces the severity and frequency of symptoms in addition to decreasing the need for rescue medications. Once asthma is under good control:

- Your symptoms should occur no more than two days a week, and they should not wake you up from sleep more than one or two nights a month
- You can carry out your usual activities
- Your peak flow shouldn't drop below 80 percent of your personal best
- You need to take quick-relief medication no more than two days a week

**When to seek help.** Asthma symptoms tend to come and go. Call your doctor if your controller medication is no longer keeping your asthma under good control. Your doctor might need to increase or change your medication or make other changes in your treatment plan.

### A Dose of Discussion

The number one goal of treatment is to achieve the best possible control of asthma with the least amount of medication. To achieve this goal, it's crucial to talk with your doctor about how well your asthma medications are working. Bring up questions or concerns at every doctor visit and get in touch if any new problems crop up in between visits.

Self-affirmation is a fancy name for a simple idea: Recalling past successes to boost self-confidence helps people cope with current challenges. Recent research shows that self-affirmation may help people adopt healthy new habits, such as eating more fruits and veggies. If you're struggling to eat better or exercise more, this easy technique might help you, too.

### Self-Affirmative Action

Are you ready to say yes to self-affirmation? Follow these basic steps:

- Think about three things you have done that you will always be proud of. Write these things down to help you remember them.
- Recall one of those proud moments when you're having trouble sticking with a healthy new habit. The past success and current situation don't have to be directly related. For example, you might recall acing a job interview when you're trying to resist reaching for a doughnut. The idea is to remind yourself what a capable person you are—a trait you can also apply to the challenge at hand.

### Yes, You Can

You can use self-affirmation to boost your confidence about dealing with asthma as well. Sometimes it's hard to stay motivated to take your medicine or check your peak flow. At such times, thinking about your proudest moments can remind you that you have the stamina to keep taking care of yourself.



**Antibody.** A molecule custom-made by the immune system to latch on to and destroy a specific substance, such as a bacterium or virus.

**Antihistamine.** A type of allergy medication. Antihistamines block the effects of histamine, a chemical released by the body during an allergic reaction.

**Low birth weight.** Weighing less than 5½ pounds when born. Having a low birth weight puts newborns at high risk for health problems.

**Premature birth.** Being born before 37 weeks of pregnancy. Babies born too early may face many health problems because they are not yet ready for life outside the womb.

**Self-affirmation.** Recalling past successes and proud moments to boost self-confidence. This may help people cope with current challenges.

## Manage Asthma During Pregnancy

Being pregnant means breathing for two, and keeping asthma under control is crucial for the health of both mothers and babies. Yet symptoms are often in flux at this time, worsening for about one-third of pregnant women. That's why it is so important for expectant moms to work closely with their asthma-treatment doctors.

If you're pregnant, you are probably extra cautious about what you put into your body. You can rest assured: The American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology reports that studies have shown that most inhaled asthma medications are safe for use during pregnancy. The risks of letting asthma spiral out of control seem to far exceed the risks of taking these medications.

### Know the Risks

Uncontrolled asthma reduces the amount of oxygen in a pregnant woman's blood. This, in turn, decreases the oxygen supply of her fetus. When the fetus doesn't get a steady, adequate supply of oxygen, growth and development may be affected. The risks of uncontrolled asthma during pregnancy include:

- **Preeclampsia.** A sudden increase in the mother's blood pressure after the 20th week of pregnancy. It can affect the mother's kidneys, liver, and brain, and it's also a leading cause of problems in the fetus.
- **Premature birth.** A baby born early, before 37 weeks of pregnancy. Because the baby is not fully ready for life outside the womb, he or she may face a number of health challenges.
- **Low birth weight.** A baby who weighs less than 5½ pounds at birth. Death rates are nearly 25 times higher for low-birth-weight newborns compared to those of normal weight.
- **Perinatal mortality.** Death of a baby around the time of birth.

### Stay in Control

Fortunately, asthma that is well-controlled during pregnancy can keep these risks in check. To this end, your doctor will closely monitor your symptoms and adjust your treatment as needed. This may be especially important during the late second and early third trimesters, when asthma tends to worsen.

If asthma is managed throughout pregnancy, it rarely causes problems during labor and delivery. So relax and enjoy this special time. By taking care of your asthma, you're getting a head start on nurturing your baby.



# Be a Sport!

School is out, and summer sports are in. You can still play hard with asthma. Staying active with sports is not only fun; it's also good for your health—and that's as true for kids with asthma as it is for other kids.

## Why Exercise?

A lot of good things can come from being active. Getting exercise helps your lungs work better. It also helps make your muscles and bones strong.

On the downside, some kids with asthma find that exercise makes them huff and puff. If you have this problem, tell your doctor. He or she can help you figure out how to handle it. There's no reason to stay on the sidelines. Up to one in five top athletes have asthma that is brought on by exercise. Asthma doesn't stop them from enjoying sports. It doesn't have to stop you, either!

## Get Your Game On

Here are some tips for playing sports with asthma:

- **Take your medicine.** If your doctor tells you to use your inhaler before exercise, be sure to do it.
- **Pick an asthma-friendly sport.** Do you have trouble with nonstop running? Try sports that call for short bursts of energy, such as gymnastics or softball.
- **Go for a swim.** The warmth and humidity of a swimming pool may help your asthma.
- **Warm up first.** Get your body ready to work hard by moving at an easy pace for a few minutes. Your chest may not feel as tight after exercise.



- **Move it indoors.** Heat and pollution may irritate your asthma. Exercise inside if you need to.
- **Avoid asthma triggers.** If the grass on the playing field makes you wheeze, find somewhere else to exercise that day.

Don't let asthma get in the way of sports. Tell your doctor if you're having trouble. The right treatment can keep you in the game this summer!

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