



Asthma Outlook

STAYING HEALTHY ■ LIVING WELL

FALL 2009

Eat Well to Stay Healthy

The next time you open the fridge or grab lunch on the go, try to make lung-friendly food choices. While there's no special diet for asthma, healthy foods can help fight inflammation and keep lungs strong. Follow these tips to make smart food choices:

- **Eat plenty of fruits and veggies.** Vitamins and antioxidants can lower inflammation in the lungs.
- **Go for fish.** Certain types of fish contain omega-3 fats, which travel to lung cells and block inflammation. Getting more omega-3s may reduce coughing and wheezing.
- **Trim portions.** Being overweight can lead to more asthma symptoms and the need for higher doses of medication. Today's super-sized servings of food can pack on the pounds. Reduce your portion sizes to reduce calories, which will help take the weight off.

Good sources of omega-3s include salmon, lake trout, albacore tuna, and mackerel.



Is It Safe to Take Aspirin if I Have Asthma?

When aches and pains strike, you may reach for aspirin. But aspirin and other over-the-counter pain medications could trigger an asthma attack. This happens most often for those with both asthma and nasal polyps. If you have the following symptoms after taking aspirin, you may have a sensitivity to it:

- Wheezing
- Stuffy or runny nose
- Difficulty breathing

An asthma attack from aspirin can be severe, so if your asthma has ever gotten worse after taking aspirin, stop taking it. Also avoid other nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen and naproxen. One pain medication that is usually safe for those with asthma is acetaminophen (Tylenol).

It's possible to have an asthma attack after taking aspirin, even if you've never had problems in the past. For this reason, everyone with asthma should be cautious about taking aspirin and other NSAIDs. If you have questions about what over-the-counter pain medications are safe for you, be sure to ask your doctor.

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 health care provider 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

Elude the Flu

For people with asthma, the flu can lead to more serious conditions, such as pneumonia and severe respiratory problems. That's why it's important to get a flu vaccine every year before the flu season hits. But according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, only about one-third of adults with asthma get vaccinated.

Children older than 6 months with asthma should also get a flu vaccine. So should anyone in close contact with them, including their parents, nannies, and daycare providers. Children up to age 9 will need two doses the first year they are vaccinated. The best time to get a flu vaccine is in September, so be sure to mark your calendar!

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

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Can Asthma Affect Your Mental Health?

You know that asthma affects your body, but did you ever stop to think about how it affects your mental well-being? In a recent survey, people who reported mental health problems often also had asthma. Can one condition actually cause the other? Researchers are just beginning to sort out these mind-body connections.

The Asthma-Mental Health Link

About two to five of every 10 people with asthma also suffer from depression. That's understandable, as asthma is a challenge to manage. Having asthma can make you feel anxious about physical activity, and it can mean missing school or work or waking up in the night because of symptoms. But experiencing depression or anxiety may actually raise the risk for asthma. In a study of more than 18,000 adults, those who experienced severe stress, depression, or anxiety in childhood were more likely to have asthma. Researchers think these experiences may harm a child's nervous and immune systems, leading to asthma later in life.

What You Can Do

Any mental health problem needs attention because being depressed or anxious affects every aspect of life. Plus, depression and anxiety can make it harder for you to take care of yourself and stick with your asthma management plan.

If you think you might be depressed, are feeling anxious, or have other mental health concerns, talk with your doctor. If you're not sure how to raise the issue, just say, "I haven't been feeling myself lately, and I'd like to talk with you about it." There are effective treatments for depression and other mood disorders that your doctor may suggest. These steps can help as well:

- **Attend a support group for people with asthma.** The friendship, support, and learning that take place can be very beneficial. To find one in your community, call your local American Lung Association or ask your doctor.
- **Children with asthma can benefit from attending a kids' asthma program or asthma camp.** These activities can boost self-confidence.
- **When asthma is well-controlled, you'll feel more in control and less anxious.** So see your doctor if you're having asthma symptoms. Your doctor may suggest a change in medication. This can make a big difference in managing your asthma.



Asthma and Older Adults

We often think of asthma as a childhood disease, but many people experience their first asthma symptoms well into their 60s or 70s. And asthma can be harder to manage when it develops later in life. But if you're an older adult with asthma, these tips will help you take better care of yourself.

Ah-Choo!

Many older adults have allergies, and allergies can trigger asthma symptoms. One study found that nearly 75 percent of older adults with asthma were allergic to cat dander, dust or dust mites, mold, or other substances. Unfortunately, older adults may experience more side effects when they take an antihistamine for allergy symptoms, especially if they also take an antidepressant.

What to do: If you have allergies, ask your doctor how you can avoid allergy triggers. Be sure to let your doctor know if you experience blurry vision, anxiety, confusion, constipation, or trouble urinating after taking an antihistamine. Newer antihis-

tamines are less likely to cause these side effects.

Bugaboos

Colds and flu are already serious illnesses in older adults. But the added stress on airways caused by these illnesses can trigger an asthma attack. Dangerous infections, such as pneumonia, can develop as a result. Your best bet is to ward off cold and flu bugs.

What to do: Avoid grandkids and others who have colds and sniffles. Be sure to wash your hands frequently. It's also important to get a flu vaccine every fall. Adults older than 65 need a one-time pneumonia vaccine, too. If you do get sick, call your doctor right away.

Smoggy Skies

Air pollution, especially ozone, can spell trouble for older adults. Ozone irritates air passageways to the lungs and leads to more asthma symptoms. When ozone levels are high, more people with asthma wind up in the emergency room with breathing problems.

What to do: Check local air pollution and ozone levels in your daily newspaper or on the Internet. Stay indoors on days when pollution and ozone levels are high.

Pills and More Pills

It is not uncommon for older adults to take several drugs to manage multiple health conditions. But some drugs

may trigger asthma symptoms or interfere with asthma medication.

What to do: Make sure your doctor knows about every medicine you take. Bring a list of your medications or the bottles themselves to each visit. If you see more than one doctor, make sure each one has your complete drug list.

Getting the Right Dose

Using an asthma inhaler takes coordination and dexterity. You have to coordinate breathing in with pushing down on the inhaler. This can be difficult for anyone, but especially for those with arthritis. If you are unable to use your inhaler correctly, it will be difficult to get the proper amount of asthma medicine.

What to do: At your next visit, have your doctor review your inhaler technique. If using an inhaler is too difficult, ask about a nebulizer. This device emits medicine into the air for you, allowing you to breathe the medicine into your lungs.

Team Up with Your Doctor

The best way to control your asthma is to partner with your doctor:

- Describe any symptoms you have.
- Make sure you understand what each medication is for and how to take it.
- Ask for a written asthma plan that outlines which medicines to take daily and what to do when you have symptoms. Ask for a peak flow meter, too. This helps you monitor your asthma.

With the right asthma treatment and self-care, you can stay healthy and keep active. That's a good thing no matter what your age.

Standing Up for Yourself

Do you have trouble speaking up for yourself? People who have a chronic health condition should be able to express their needs to others at home, work, and school. This can reduce stress, anxiety, and anger. The key is to learn how to be assertive.

When you communicate assertively, you state your feelings, needs, or rights in a polite but firm way. It's the middle ground between being passive and being aggressive. Think about these three statements:

1. **"You're so rude and inconsiderate to smoke around me."** This statement is aggressive, as it accuses the other person. It's likely to backfire and cause a negative reaction.
2. **"I guess it's OK if you smoke."** This statement is passive, as it lets the other person do something that bothers or harms you.
3. **"Being around smoke makes my asthma worse, so please don't smoke."** This statement is honest, but respectful of the other person. This is a good example of assertive communication.

To communicate assertively, try the following strategies:

- **Speak in a calm voice.**
- **Use an "I" statement.** This keeps the focus on you and your needs, rather than blaming the other person. "I need your help with the chores" is more effective than, "You never lift a finger to help me."
- **State facts instead of making judgments.** "No, I can't pick you up today—my schedule is packed" is more effective than "How can you even think of asking me to do that today?"

It's easier to be assertive in some situations than others. By practicing assertive communication regularly, you can learn to stand up for yourself when it's needed.





Antioxidants. These are substances in foods that protect cells from damage. Antioxidants also may strengthen immunity and help protect against disease. Examples are lutein, beta-carotene, and vitamins C and E. Fruits, vegetables, nuts, and whole grains are good sources of antioxidants.

Nasal polyps. Small growths of inflamed tissue inside the nose that can block the nasal passage and interfere with breathing. They can be treated with medication or removed with surgery.

Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). Drugs that reduce pain and inflammation by reducing levels of prostaglandins in the body. There are both prescription and over-the-counter NSAIDs. Common ones are ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) and naproxen (Aleve, Naprosyn). Always ask your doctor if you should take an NSAID with food or drink.

Outwitting the Mighty Mites

Dust mites are invisible, but they can make life miserable. Read on to learn how to outsmart these little troublemakers.

What Are Dust Mites?

They're tiny insects related to spiders and ticks, but they don't bite or spread diseases. Dust mites can't be seen with the naked eye. They feed on skin flakes and dander from people and animals and usually live in bedding, furniture, pillows, carpets, and stuffed toys.

Dust mites can trigger allergies and asthma symptoms. Some children develop asthma from being around them. Reactions to dust mites include wheezing, coughing, sneezing, and a stuffy, runny, or itchy nose. Symptoms are often worse at night because most dust mites live in mattresses and bedding.

How Can I Control Dust Mites?

Cleaning regularly can help reduce the number of dust mites in your home:

- **Vacuum carpets and upholstery once a week.** Vacuuming raises dust, so

wear a dust mask and use a microfilter vacuum bag or HEPA filter (high-efficiency particulate air filter). Stay out of just-cleaned rooms for 20 minutes for dust to settle.

- **Clean the dust from shelves and other surfaces often.** Be sure to use a damp rag to avoid stirring up dust.
- **Wash sheets and blankets in hot water once a week.**
- **Buy only washable stuffed animals and keep them off the bed.** Wash them often in hot water, and dry them well.

What Else Can I Do?

- Avoid bedding made of wool or feathers.
- Put dust-proof covers on mattresses and pillows.
- Remove carpets from bedrooms.
- Replace upholstered furniture with wood or plastic furniture.
- Use a dehumidifier in your home. Dust mites thrive on moisture and can't survive if the humidity is less than 40 or 50 percent.

You can't eliminate every dust mite in your home, but these steps will help you reduce your exposure to them.





RELAXATION to the Rescue!

Have you ever had days when you just felt stressed out? Maybe you were worried about a test at school or you had a fight with a friend. Upsetting things happen to everybody. When they do, it's normal to feel anxious or stressed. But sometimes these feelings make asthma worse. Here are two great ways you can shake off stress and start to feel better.

* Big Belly Breath

Lie down on the floor. Wiggle your body a little to get comfortable, then lie still with one hand on your stomach. Now breathe in through your nose slowly and deeply. Try to breathe all the way into your stomach, so you feel your belly rise under your hand. Now slowly breathe out through your mouth. Feel your belly go back down. Do this five times. Each time you exhale, let your body sink into the floor.

* Melting Ice Cream

Lie on the floor and get comfortable. Take a couple of deep breaths and let them out. Now imagine you're a big scoop of ice cream on a warm sidewalk. The sun is shining, and you feel warm and happy. Now imagine you're starting to melt. Feel the warm sun, little by little, melting you into a puddle. When you're completely melted, lie still, feeling warm and relaxed.

Try doing these relaxation exercises often. The more you practice, the better you'll get. Then you'll be able to relax quickly the next time you feel stressed out.

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