



Control your asthma: expect nothing less

By Fred Reed, MD, North Basin Medical Clinics



When it comes to asthma, many make the mistake of accepting its symptoms as a normal part of life. If asthma is correctly diagnosed and managed, it can be controlled with you and your doctor working together as an aggressive team.

Asthma is a chronic disease where the airways of the lung become narrow or blocked, inflamed and swollen, making breathing extremely difficult.

In the U.S., an estimated 15 million people of all ages suffer from asthma. That number is hard to nail down as asthma is often poorly diagnosed. So how do you know if you have asthma? By getting a baseline breathing test and having it repeated yearly.

Until you have the proper diagnostic breathing tests, neither you, nor your doctor, know for certain if you have asthma. Other illnesses can act like asthma and, if your current treatment hasn't helped you, it's very possible you don't have asthma at all.

For those with a clinical asthma diagnosis, know that you can most likely become symptom free with proper treatment. Imagine no wheezing, coughing, shortness of breath or tightness in the chest. With proper, aggressive treatment you should be able to sleep through the night, participate in physical activities and not miss any work or school. How is this possible? Follow these steps...

- **Learn what prompts your asthma episodes.** Stay away from, or control your triggers. Be aggressive in this and don't be shy. If you're going to a friend's house, ask if they smoke, have pets or an air filter before you go. Same thing with hotels. Ask about cleaning habits, feather pillows and air conditioning if those trigger an attack for you.
- **Respond quickly to warning signs of an attack.** Take your medication or use your inhaler as soon as symptoms such as coughing, tightness in your chest, wheezing or shortness of breath arise. If you're on daily medication, take it faithfully. I recommend taking it at the same time each day even if you have to leave a note on the bathroom mirror or have a family member remind you. Be sure to keep your inhaler and medication close at hand and keep a log of your peak flows.
- **Make your doctor the coach of your "treatment team."** This should include making two treatment plans – one for daily treatment and one for emergencies. Your doctor should know your triggers, warning signs and daily medication pattern. The two of you should also decide if there are other times to take medication such as before exercising or at the first sign of a cold, flu or trigger exposure. Write down what your doctor wants you to do when symptoms occur *and do it!* This is called an Asthma Action Plan.

To get an idea of what a good treatment plan looks like, log onto the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute website www.nhlbi.nih.gov/ and type in "asthma." They have a flow chart under "Your Asthma Can Be Controlled" that is a helpful outline.

If your asthma doesn't seem to get better despite efforts to treat it, ask yourself these questions...

1. Is there something in my environment or workplace?
2. Am I taking my medicine as prescribed or using my inhaler correctly?
3. Am I on the correct medicines?
4. Do I know how bad my asthma really is?
5. Do I have asthma or is this really some other illness?

To find the answers to these questions, talk to your doctor often and openly. Ask questions. Give information. Expect answers and follow directions. Building this relationship is the key to controlling your asthma.

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