

## Overview

### Summary

**A**sthma is a chronic disease of the tubes that carry air to the lungs. These airways become narrow and their linings become swollen, irritated, and inflamed. In patients with asthma, the airways are always irritated and inflamed, even though symptoms are not always present. The degree and severity of airway inflammation varies over time.

Symptoms of asthma include

- Wheezing
- Coughing
- Shortness of breath
- Tightness in the chest

If you are concerned your child may have asthma, talk to your health care provider. She will test your child's airway function. It is important to remember that asthma is a complicated disease to diagnose, and the results of airway function testing may be normal even if your child has asthma.

### Asthma Triggers

Certain things cause asthma "attacks" or make asthma worse. These are called triggers. Some common asthma triggers are

- Infections of the airways
- Allergens
- Irritants in the environment (outside or indoor air you breathe)
- Exercise
- Stress

Decreasing your child's exposure to triggers will help decrease symptoms and the need for asthma medications.

### Asthma Medications

Children with asthma symptoms that occur only once in a while are given medications only when needed to relieve the symptoms. These are called quick-relief medications. Children with asthma whose symptoms occur more often need to take medications every day. These are called controller medications.

There is no one magic medication that controls all asthma. Sometimes it is necessary to take several medications at the same time to control and prevent symptoms. Your health care provider will choose the best medications for your child and talk to you about when to use them.

Most asthma medications can be inhaled directly into the lungs. Inhalation has major advantages over other ways of taking medication because the medicine passes straight into the airways. As a result, side effects are reduced or avoided altogether. In addition, asthma medications work much faster when inhaled than when taken orally.

## **Peak Flow Meter**

To help control asthma, your child may need to use a peak flow meter. This is a handheld device that measures how fast a person can blow air out of the lungs. The peak flow meter uses 3 colors—green, yellow, and red, like traffic lights—to show if the airway is opening or closing up. It also has a scale to help you determine if your child's asthma is getting better or worse. Peak flow rates decrease (the numbers on the scale go down) when your child's asthma is getting worse or is out of control. Peak flow rates increase (the numbers on the scale go up) when the asthma treatment is working and the airways are opening up.

## **Asthma and School**

Children spend a significant part of their day at school. That is why it is so important that asthma symptoms are well managed while they are there. It is also important that you are aware of your child's symptoms and any problems with how your child's asthma is managed in school. Because exercise is so important to a child's overall health, every effort should be made to keep your child active in school sports while also keeping asthma symptoms under good control.

As you can see, asthma is a complicated yet treatable condition. By using medications, avoiding triggers and environments that can cause asthma attacks, and carefully managing symptoms, children with asthma can lead normal and healthy lives.

If you have any questions about your child's health, symptoms of asthma, or how your child's asthma is being managed, talk to your health care provider. He or she is the best source of information about your child's health.

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