

ASTHMA CARE

THE DOCTOR'S ROLE IN ASTHMA CARE

The doctor's role in asthma care begins with your diagnosis. Once a doctor decides that you have asthma, then you and the doctor can work together to control it.

During the diagnosis, a doctor will take your medical history, give you a physical checkup and do some lab tests. These tests may include a chest x-ray, blood and allergy tests, and lung-function tests. These tests may include a chest x-ray, blood and allergy tests, and lung function tests, such as spirometry. In spirometry, you blow into a device called a spirometer, which measures the air you breathe in and out of your lungs.

Once the doctor decides that you do, indeed, have asthma, then medical treatment can start. This means that the doctor chooses the best asthma medicines at the right doses for you.

The doctor, too, may recommend that you start using a peak flow meter at home. Ask your doctor about this.

In peak flow monitoring, you blow into a device, called a peak flow meter, which measures the greatest amount of air that you can exhale. Peak flow meters are easy to use by yourself every day. These devices can help you to know if your breathing problems are starting even when you don't feel any asthma symptoms. That way, you know when to take your asthma medicine before your symptoms get worse.

After you start taking your asthma medicines, you need to see *a doctor on a regular basis, not just when you're having problems.* That way the doctor can make certain your medicines are working well.

The doctor needs to know if:

- You have breathing problems at night and you do not get a good night's sleep.
- Your asthma makes it hard for you to do things during the day.
- You take more medicine than the doctor has prescribed. This is a danger sign! It means that something is not working right with your treatment.

There is no need for you to suffer. Once you talk with a doctor, you may find that a change in your asthma medicines is all that is needed to help you feel better.

So talk regularly to a doctor about your asthma. There are many things that can start asthma and asthma can change, sometimes getting better or worse.

You may find that your medicines need to be changed. Or, new medicines may be available that will work even better for you.

YOUR ROLE IN ASTHMA CARE

There are three things that you need to do to control your asthma:

- **FIRST:** See a doctor or other primary care health provider regularly about your asthma. This is important because your symptoms can change over time. Your triggers can change, too. You may need different medicines to help keep you healthy. So regular contact with a doctor or other primary care health provider is an important part of controlling your asthma.
- **SECOND:** Take your asthma medicines as the doctor has prescribed, *even when you feel well*. That way, you keep breathing problems from happening.
- **THIRD:** Get educated about asthma. Find out what triggers it and what you must do to stay healthy. In fact, everyone in your family should know about asthma and know what to do when you need help.

Start taking control of asthma:

- Learn your triggers and symptoms and what to do about them.
- Learn what to do for asthma attacks.
- Learn about your medicines so you know how quickly they should work.

AIR PARTICLES WE BREATHE

Many particles of different types and sizes are carried in the air we breathe. Some large particles may settle on the walls and furniture in your home. Other large particles are removed by your nose and mouth when you inhale. Smaller particles are breathed deep into the lungs.

Asthma may be triggered by both the large and small particles. Some air particles come from the indoors. Others are carried in the outdoor air. Outdoor particles come into your home through windows, doors, and heating systems.

For most people, the indoor air particles cause no problems. But people with allergic symptoms including asthma can have problems, right in their own home.

ASTHMA AND ALLERGY "TRIGGERS"

If you or someone you know have allergic symptoms or asthma, you are sensitive to "triggers," including particles carried in the air. These "triggers" can set off a reaction in your lungs and other parts of your body. Triggers can be found indoors or outdoors. They can be simple things like:

- Cold air.
- Tobacco smoke and wood smoke.
- Perfume, paint, hair spray, or any strong odors or fumes.
- Allergens (particles that cause allergies) such as dust mites, pollen, molds, pollution, and animal dander - tiny scales or particles that fall off hair, feathers or skin - and saliva from any pets.
- Common cold, influenza, and other respiratory illnesses.

You may be able to add more triggers to this list. Other things may also trigger your asthma or allergies. It's important to learn which triggers are a problem for you. Ask your doctor to help. Your doctor may suggest:

- Keeping an asthma diary.
- Skin testing to test for allergies.

Finding triggers isn't always easy. If you do know your triggers, cutting down exposure to them may help avoid asthma and allergy attacks.

If you don't know your triggers, try to limit your exposure to one suspected trigger at a time. Watch to see if you get better. This may show you if the trigger was a problem for you.

OUTDOOR AIR, INDOOR AIR AND AIR-CONDITIONING

Controlling your exposure to triggers outdoors is hard. You may have to avoid outdoor air pollution, pollen, and mold spores. Any time air pollution and pollen levels are high, it's a good idea to stay indoors.

The air at home is easier to control. Some people with asthma and allergies notice that their symptoms get worse at night. Trigger controls in the bedroom or wherever you sleep need the most care.

Air-conditioning can help. It allows windows and doors to stay closed. This keeps some pollen and mold spores outside. It also lowers indoor humidity. Low humidity helps to control mold and dust mites.

Avoid too much air-conditioning or too much heat. Room air temperature should be comfortable for someone with allergies or asthma. Some people

can't tolerate a big change in temperature, particularly from warm to cold air.

There are some devices that effectively remove particles from air. Their usefulness in reducing allergy symptoms is under study.

TRIGGER CONTROLS

Here are some common triggers and some ways to help control them at home:

Tobacco Smoke

Smoke should not be allowed in the home of someone with asthma or allergies. Ask family members and friends to smoke outdoors. Suggest that they quit smoking. Your local American Lung Association can help. Ask your Lung Association how you can help a family member or friend [quit smoking](#).

Wood Smoke

Wood smoke is a problem for children and adults with asthma and allergies. Avoid wood stoves and fireplaces.

Pets

Almost all pets can cause allergies, including dogs, cats and especially small animals like birds, hamsters and guinea pigs. All pets should be removed from the home if pets trigger asthma and allergy symptoms.

Pet allergen may stay in the home for months after the pet is gone because it remains in house dust. Allergy and asthma symptoms may take some time to get better.

If the pet stays in the home, keep it out of the bedroom of anyone with asthma or allergies. Weekly pet baths may help cut down the amount of pet saliva and dander in the home.

Sometimes you hear that certain cats or dogs are "non-allergenic." There really is no such thing as a "non-allergenic" cat or dog, especially if the pet leaves dander and saliva in the home. Goldfish and other tropical fish may be a good substitute.

Cockroaches

Even cockroaches can cause problems, so it's important to get rid of roaches in your home. Small pieces of dead roaches and roach droppings settle in house dust and can end up in the air you breathe.

Like humans, roaches need food and water and a place to live. Help keep your home roach free by storing food in sealable containers and keeping crumbs, dirty dishes and other sources of food waste cleaned up; fixing leaks and wiping up standing water; and cleaning up clutter where roaches find shelter.

If you still have problems and you have to choose a pesticide, be sure to use it safely, and as directed on the label. Baits are less likely than sprays or foggers to harm your lungs.

Indoor Mold

When humidity is high, molds can be a problem in bathrooms, kitchens, and basements. Make sure these areas have good air circulation and are cleaned often. The basement in particular may need a dehumidifier. And remember, the water in the dehumidifier must be emptied and the container cleaned often to prevent forming mildew.

Molds may form on foam pillows when you perspire. To prevent mold, wash the pillow every week, dry thoroughly and make sure to change it every year.

Molds also form in houseplants, so check them often. You may have to keep all plants outdoors.

Strong Odors or Fumes

Perfume, room deodorizers, cleaning chemicals, paint, and talcum powder are examples of triggers that must be avoided or kept to very low levels.

Dust Mites

Dust mites are tiny, microscopic spiders usually found in house dust. Several thousand mites can be found in a pinch of dust. Mites are one of the major triggers for people with allergies and asthma. They need the most work to remove.

Following these rules can also help get rid of dust mites:

- Put mattresses in allergen-impermeable covers. Tape over the length of the zipper.
- Put pillows in allergen-permeable covers. Tape over the length of the zipper. Or wash the pillow every week.
- Wash all bedding every week in water that is at least 130 degrees F. Removing the bedspread at night may help.
- Don't sleep or lie down on upholstered (stuffed) furniture.
- Remove carpeting in the bedroom.
- Clean up surface dust as often as possible. Use a damp mop or damp cloth when you clean. Don't use aerosols or spray cleaners in the bedroom. And don't clean the room when someone with asthma or allergies is present.
- Window coverings attract dust. Use window shades or curtains made of plastic or other washable material for easy cleaning.
- Remove stuffed furniture and stuffed animals (unless the animals can be washed), and anything under the bed.
- Closets need extra care. They should hold only needed clothing. Putting clothes in a plastic garment bag may help. (Do not use the plastic bag that covers dry cleaning).
- Dust mites like moisture and high humidity. Cutting down the humidity in your home can cut down the number of mites. A dehumidifier may help.
- Air cleaning devices, including portable units and central filtration systems may be helpful in reducing some indoor air pollutants when used with effective source control and ventilation. Ask your doctor for advice about air cleaning devices. If you decide to use one, make sure it removes particles efficiently over an extended period of time and does not produce ozone.

GENERAL RULES TO HELP CONTROL THE HOME ENVIRONMENT

Controlling the home environment is a very important part of asthma and allergy care. Some general rules for home control for all members of the family are:

- Reduce or remove as many asthma and allergy triggers from your home as possible.
- If possible, use air filters and air conditioners -- and properly maintain them -- to make your home cleaner and more comfortable.
- Pay attention to the problem of dust mites. Work hard to control this problem in the bedroom.
- Vacuum cleaners with poor filtration and design characteristics release and stir up dust and allergens.

Select a unit with high-efficiency filters such as micro filter or HEPA media, good suction, and sealed construction. Ask for test data from manufacturers to determine the quantity and size of dust particles captured (*e.g., 96 % at 1.0 micron or 99.97% at 0.3 micron*). Alternately, consider a central vacuum that exhausts particulate outside the home.

Anyone with asthma or allergies may want to avoid vacuuming.