

Taking Control of Asthma

Determining If Asthma Is Controlled

Many people with asthma overestimate the control that they have over their asthma. People may get used to feeling a certain way and not realize that the symptoms of asthma are not "normal." Uncontrolled asthma can lead to loss of lung function, emergency room visits, hospitalization, and even death. It is important to learn if asthma is under control.

The first step in controlling asthma is to determine asthma symptoms and their frequency. Symptoms include: wheezing, breathlessness, a feeling of tightness in the chest, and nighttime and morning coughing. If symptoms occur more than twice a week during the day or more than twice a month at night, then asthma is not controlled. Lung function should be normal in a person with good asthma control.

Monitoring Lung Function

Monitoring lung function is important for people with asthma. Keeping track of breathing capacity on a daily or weekly basis can provide information as to whether asthma is under control, if medication is needed, or if emergency help is required.

Lung capacity is measured by using a peak flow meter. A peak flow meter is a hand-held device that measures the capacity of the lungs to move air in and out. It is important to use peak flow meters according to directions and record the readings accurately. Health care providers may recommend keeping daily records of peak flow meter readings or suggest readings only 2 or 3 times per week. Records should include date, time of day, and peak flow reading.

A benchmark reading is set by taking readings a couple times daily for a couple of weeks. Once a "personal best" peak flow reading is determined, a judgment can be made about subsequent readings. Health care providers will set guidelines about these readings based on individual "personal best" peak flow readings.

In general, if peak flow is 80% (or better) of the personal best readings, asthma is under control. A number between 50% and 80% of the personal best means that a quick-relief medicine is needed. A reading lower than 50% means serious asthma symptoms. A reading lower than 50% requires taking quick-relief medicine immediately and seeking additional help from your health care provider.

The goal of asthma treatment is to minimize asthma symptoms, limit the use of rescue medicines, and maintain normal activity levels such as work and school attendance, exercise, and other physical activities.

Treating Asthma

Asthma treatment can include quick-relief medications (inhalers) or long-term preventative medications. Fast-acting relief inhalers are used when the first symptoms of asthma appear and are usually effective within minutes. Long-term preventative medications are taken by people with persistent asthma over a long period of time. These medicines are taken daily and must be taken consistently for a few weeks to be effective.

People with asthma should follow their asthma management plan, which includes a written plan of what medicines to take and what to do if asthma symptoms worsen. A healthcare professional should be seen regularly to monitor symptoms, medications, and lung function measurements. Over time, symptoms may improve so medications may be altered or reduced according to an individual's symptoms.