



# Asthma Outlook

STAYING HEALTHY ■ LIVING WELL

SUMMER 2011

## Coffee: A Magic Potion for Asthma?

Your morning cup o' joe could be more than just a quick pick-me-up. In an article in the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, British scientists reviewed the evidence on asthma and caffeine. They found that caffeine slightly improves airway function in people with asthma. The effect lasts for at least two hours after a moderate amount of caffeine—about the amount in two to three cups of coffee.

### **Don't Start Downing Lattes**

It turns out that the caffeine in coffee is a weak bronchodilator—that is, it is modestly effective in opening your airways. Caffeine also may mildly fight fatigue in your breathing muscles.

The improvement is small, however. Scientists don't know whether it's substantial enough to help you feel better. But they do know that coffee is no substitute for asthma medicines.

Drinking a lot of coffee does have a downside. Some people with asthma have gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). Caffeine can make it worse.

### **How Much Is OK?**

Even if you don't have GERD, excessive caffeine may cause anxiety, trouble sleeping, upset stomach, and rapid heartbeat. Don't drink more than two to three cups of coffee per day.



### How Can You Make Your Family Vacation Truly Relaxing?

“Vacation stress” may sound like a contradiction in terms. But any kind of change—even a fun one—can trigger stress. But some preplanning can help keep everyone smiling:

1. Involve older children in decisions about where to go and what to do on vacation.
2. Let kids be kids. Plan at least one child-oriented activity a day, such as a visit to the zoo.
3. Make sure your children get enough sleep and relaxation time. Otherwise, they can get burnt out or cranky.
4. Plan fewer activities than you think you have time for. Rushing to reach a destination or catch a plane can add unwelcome stress to your family vacation.
5. Schedule time for stress-busting naps and exercise along the way.
6. Bring a “fun bag” with snacks, games, and other items your kids enjoy.
7. Try to keep to a daily routine as much as possible. Children are reassured by structure and predictability.

## 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

#### Your Supply of Asthma Medications

Running out of asthma medication can put your health at serious risk. Here's what you can do to make sure you always have the amount you need:

- Don't wait until the last minute to refill your prescriptions. Allow extra time for any refills you get by mail.
- Prepare for out-of-town trips. Pack more medicine than you think you'll need and keep it with you at all times.
- Keep enough medicine on hand so that you have enough to handle flare-ups.

➤ Talk with your health care provider to figure out what is a reasonable amount of asthma medication to keep on hand.

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

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## Can You Outgrow Asthma?

**“Don’t worry, you’ll grow out of your asthma someday.” While these words can be reassuring to many young people with asthma, they aren’t necessarily true. Unfortunately, the idea that you can leave asthma behind once you hit adulthood in many cases is just a myth.**



Asthma is the most common long-term disease in children. But it can affect people for their whole lives. While it’s true that some see their asthma fade as they get older, particularly in the teen years, many others don’t. Or their asthma may disappear for a while, then pop up later on in adulthood.

The reappearance of asthma is actually quite common. One study in the journal *Chest* followed young adults who had asthma when they were kids, but were without symptoms by the time they reached age 18. About one-third saw their asthma return in their mid-20s. The good news is that these cases were often mild and easily controllable.

### Who’s More Likely to Have Asthma Stick Around?

Doctors can’t easily predict which people will see their asthma return or continue later on in life. But certain people may be more likely to have asthma through their adult years. According to

a study in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, people who were most likely to continue having asthma as adults were:

- Women
- People who developed asthma at a young age, around age 9
- Smokers
- Allergic to dust mites

### Keeping Asthma Under Control

Many of the same tips that help keep childhood asthma under control also work for adults.

You can reduce the risk of asthma attacks by avoiding certain triggers that can make asthma worse, such as smoke. Here are some tips to control these triggers:

- Use mattress and pillowcase covers to target dust mites.
- Don’t allow pets to sleep in the bedroom.
- Keep your indoor humidity between 35 and 50 percent to control allergy-causing mold.

## Asthma-Wise Guide to Air Cleaners

When you think about air pollution, the first thing that comes to mind is probably a thick smog over a city's horizon. But air inside your home can be surprisingly dirty, too. Pet dander, dust mite fragments, cigarette smoke, and other substances in indoor air can worsen your asthma. So are air cleaners the solution?

Air cleaners can only help so much. None will control your asthma on their own. But as part of an overall treatment plan, some air cleaners may reduce certain asthma triggers. Most studies have evaluated portable units with high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters, which remove impurities from the air. One study in *Pediatrics* found this type of air cleaner reduced unscheduled doctor visits for asthma in kids by almost 20 percent.

Importantly, persons with asthma should never use an ozone generator or deionizer. These types of air cleaners are dangerous for the lungs and can seriously worsen asthma.

### Coverage

The two styles of air cleaners available cover different amounts of area in your home. Portable air-cleaning devices work in a

single room or section of your home. They're easy to set up and move between rooms.

Whole-house air cleaners are installed in the ductwork of your home's heating and air-conditioning system. They clean air throughout the entire house. But some homes may not meet installation requirements. You may also need to hire a professional installer.

### Cost

The initial purchase price of a portable air cleaner ranges from \$110 to \$860. And you also should consider the ongoing costs for maintenance and operation. The yearly cost for filters and electricity ranges from \$60 to \$270.

When shopping, factor in the price of filters and the frequency with which they'll need to be replaced. Also, look for a unit with the Energy Star logo. These air cleaners are 40

percent more energy efficient, which helps with electricity bills.

### Effectiveness

The effectiveness of room air cleaners is measured by their clean air delivery rate (CADR). Look for the Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers (AHAM) seal on the box of a portable air cleaner. You'll see three CADR numbers: one for tobacco smoke, one for pollen, and one for dust. The higher the numbers, the faster the unit filters air.

What is the right CADR number? The AHAM recommends portable units with a tobacco smoke CADR that is at least two-thirds of the room's area. For example, for a 10-by-12-foot room—120 square feet—pick a unit with a tobacco smoke CADR of at least 80.

## Air Cleaners at a Glance

Here's a quick look at two common types of air cleaners. They're available in both portable and whole-house models.

### ■ Mechanical air cleaners.

These have mechanical filters, including HEPA filters, that trap airborne particles in special material.

**Intended use:** These filters work best for small particles that may trigger allergies and asthma, such as pet dander and some bits of mold.

**Asthma alert:** They may not work well for larger particles, such as pollen, most dust mite fragments, and cockroach droppings. Larger particles tend to settle out of the air quickly, so most never reach the filter.

### ■ Electronic air cleaners.

These use static electricity to make airborne particles cling to special collecting plates.

**Intended use:** Like mechanical air filters, these work best for small particles.

**Asthma alert:** Some produce ozone, a gas that can irritate the lungs.

Steer clear of a third type of air cleaner: ozone generators. These devices intentionally produce ozone gas to destroy pollutants. However, at low concentrations, ozone doesn't work well for this purpose. And at higher concentrations, it's a powerful lung irritant. The bottom line: This type of air cleaner may not be safe or effective.

➤ **Interested in learning more?** Get more information about the types of air cleaners at [www.cadr.org/consumer.htm](http://www.cadr.org/consumer.htm).



## Enjoy the Fireworks, but Protect Your Lungs

From Memorial Day to the Fourth of July, it's fireworks season again. Yet when you have asthma, these festivities may come at a price. Large fireworks displays can cause spikes in air pollution. This may make your asthma symptoms worse.

In a study published in the *Journal of Hazardous Materials*, air samples from a city in Spain were collected before, during, and after a major fireworks festival. Levels of several metals in the air increased on the night of the festival and stayed higher for days. These metals were found in fine particles—ones tiny enough to be breathed deep inside the lungs.

A number of metals may be used in fireworks to create colors and for other purposes. The smoke rising from fireworks carries these metals into the air as fine particles. Once inhaled, they can irritate the airways, decrease lung function, and worsen asthma symptoms. In children, short-term spikes in particle pollution increase the risk of being hospitalized for asthma.

Fireworks may also produce gases that can add to the health risks, irritating the lungs and causing asthma attacks.

### ➤ What You Can Do

It's best to be cautious, especially if you live in an urban area. Air quality there may already be a concern. For the next few days after a big fireworks show, check the Air Quality Index (AQI) at [www.airnow.gov](http://www.airnow.gov). If the AQI is high, cut back on outdoor activities until it falls back to a healthy level.



### **Bronchodilator.**

A medicine that helps open tight airways. This type of medicine is inhaled. It is typically used to stop an asthma attack that has already begun.

**Decongestant spray.** Decongestant spray helps to treat congestion, or a stuffy nose. Congestion occurs when tissues in the nose become swollen. The spray helps to shrink blood vessels in the nose that cause the swelling. Decongestant sprays should not be used for more than three days.

**Energy Star.** Energy Star is the seal of approval from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Energy. This mark on household items means that the product has met strict guidelines and uses energy efficiently. This helps to save money and protect the environment.

**Phlegm.** Phlegm is another name for mucus, a thick fluid that can build up in your airways because of an infection, like a cold or other virus. Mucus can make it difficult to breathe.

## Curb Nasal Problems to Manage Asthma Symptoms

Do you always seem to have a runny or stuffy nose or achy sinuses? Combine at least one of these problems with asthma and you may be at increased risk for severe asthma symptoms. That's the conclusion of a study in *Respiratory Research* by Swedish researchers.

### **The Allergy Alliance**

Nasal problems may be linked to asthma in several ways. Many asthma sufferers also have allergic rhinitis (AR)—allergies that cause congestion, sneezing, and an itchy or runny nose. Asthma and AR each involve airway inflammation. In the Swedish study, about two-thirds of people with asthma also had AR.

People with both asthma and AR generally need more asthma-related doctor visits and hospitalizations than those with asthma alone. They also seem to take more sick days from work. And their medical expenses may be higher.

### **The Infection Connection**

But allergies aren't the whole story. Sinus infections sometimes lead to long-lasting swelling in the sinuses and nasal passages. Drug side effects or frequent irritation by pollution or smoke can also cause long-term nasal congestion. Whatever the cause, a stopped-up nose can't do its job properly. Air doesn't get well filtered, humidified, and warmed in the nose before reaching the lungs. This may affect lung health as well.

### **Be Nice to Your Nose**

Don't try to treat a stubborn nasal problem with long-term use of an over-the-counter decongestant spray. Using these sprays too much can actually make the problem worse. Instead, talk with your doctor about the best treatment for you. Depending on the cause, possible treatment options include medications, saline or saltwater nasal mists, allergy shots, or surgery.



# Smoking Is Gross!

**You've probably heard that smoking is bad for you. It harms your lungs. It leads to coughing up thick, icky phlegm (pronounced "flem"). And when you have asthma, smoking can cause more frequent and serious asthma attacks.**



Nasty phlegm is reason enough not to smoke. But in case you need more reasons, here are six other things to think about:

- 1. It's unpopular.** You might believe that smoking will help you look cool and fit in. But the truth is, most kids, teens, and grown-ups choose not to smoke.
- 2. It's bad for your health.** Tobacco smoke contains more than 60 chemicals that may cause cancer. Smoking is also connected to heart problems.
- 3. Smoking really stinks.** It makes your breath, hair, and clothes smell really bad. And it can turn your teeth and fingers yellow.
- 4. It hurts athletes.** Smoking keeps enough oxygen from getting to your muscles. You're not able to run as far or as fast as you normally would.
- 5. Smoking hurts you in music.** Smoking makes it harder to breathe, so it's more difficult to play a wind instrument. Cigarettes can also ruin your singing voice.
- 6. Smoking is expensive.** A pack of cigarettes costs about \$4.80, on average. If you smoke two packs a week, that's about \$500 a year. Think of what else that money could buy!

## Don't Get Your Smoke Secondhand

Being around other people who smoke is also bad for your health. Secondhand smoke comes from two places: the tip of a lighted cigarette and the smoke exhaled by another person. This type of smoke harms your body, too. It can make asthma get worse. And it can lead to more colds and ear infections.

## Make the Choice to Really Be Cool

You might think it's OK to try smoking just once. But the harm to your body begins with your very first cigarette. And people who start smoking when they're young find it hardest to quit. So the really awesome choice is never to smoke. The best way to show how cool you are is by playing it smart.

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