



Asthma Outlook

STAYING HEALTHY ■ LIVING WELL

WINTER 2009

The Holidays with Cousin “Fluffy”

If your extended family includes members with fur or feathers, visiting relatives during the holidays may be difficult. Pets can make you itchy, wheezy, and stuffy, and may trigger an asthma attack.

Your best bet? According to the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology, you should stay at pet-free homes or hotels. If that's not possible:

- **Visit your doctor.** He or she may give you special maintenance medications to reduce reactions. Allergy shots, which build up immunity to allergens, could also help.
- **Look, but don't pet.** People with asthma and allergies react to proteins in pets' dander, saliva, and urine. If you do touch the animal, wash your hands afterward.
- **Ask for your own room.**

Choose a sleeping room with a door and keep pets out.

- **Bring your own bedding.** Hypoallergenic sheets and pillowcases keep dander from collecting.

Keep in mind, it's not just dogs and cats that can activate your asthma. Reptiles, rabbits, ferrets, and rodents such as mice and guinea pigs have been known to cause symptoms.



Should You Humidify?

Is your skin dry and your throat scratchy? Are you annoyed by static electricity? If so, your home may be too dry.

To add needed moisture, try opening a window a crack. Another option is a humidifier. When using a humidifier, it's important to:

- Use distilled water—or demineralize tap water with cartridges, cassettes, or filters
- Change the water in a portable unit daily
- Clean a portable unit every third day—follow the manufacturer's directions for cleaning console and furnace-mounted humidifiers
- Avoid exceeding 50 percent humidity—room air that's too moist encourages the growth of molds and dust mites, which can trigger allergies and asthma. To measure humidity, use your humidifier's humidistat. Another sign of high humidity: When water condenses on windows, walls, or pictures.
- If surrounding areas become damp or wet, turn the humidifier down. Or use it only occasionally.

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 an adequate supply of asthma medications on hand
- Quitting smoking

A CLOSER LOOK

Using a Peak-Flow Meter

A peak-flow meter is a small device that measures your ability to push air quickly out of your lungs.

To use a peak-flow meter correctly, follow these basic steps:

- Be sure the meter reads zero or the lowest number on its scale.
- Stand up straight and take a deep breath in. Put the meter's mouthpiece into your mouth, closing your lips tightly around it. Then blow out the breath as hard and fast as you can, emptying the air from your lungs. Note the reading on the scale.
- Repeat the process two times. Record the highest—not the average—of the three numbers.
- Note the number using the peak-flow zones suggested by your health care provider. Typically, these zones are called green (good control—80 to 100 percent of your best peak flow), yellow (caution—50 to 79 percent of normal), and red (medical alert or emergency—lower than 50 percent of normal). Follow your provider's suggestions for taking action based on your reading.

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

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Get Over Being Under the Weather



You're stuffy, sneezing, and miserable. This time it's not an asthma attack—it's just a regular old winter cold.

Having asthma makes the common cold more complicated. Colds and other respiratory infections may trigger your asthma symptoms. They also increase your risk of having asthma attacks, going to the hospital, or getting pneumonia or bronchitis. And there's some evidence these illnesses can cause asthma in young children.

So what can you do when you don't feel well? Here's how to maintain control of your asthma while you fight off the sniffles.

Manage Your Medications

Many common over-the-counter cold remedies contain pain-relief medications that worsen asthma. These include aspirin, ibuprofen, and acetaminophen. Steer clear of these products unless your doctor tells you otherwise.

According to the American Academy of Family Physicians, check with your doctor before taking decongestants. They can interfere with your asthma treatments. Keep in mind that antibiotics don't help most colds, which are caused by viruses. Don't demand them if your doctor doesn't think they'll help. Be sure to use your daily asthma medication as prescribed.

Other Ways to Seek Relief

When you're struck with the latest bug, get plenty of rest and drink lots of fluids. Avoid caffeine, alcohol, and smoking or being near smokers. If you have a sore or scratchy throat, try gargling with warm salt

water. Petroleum jelly rubbed on the outside of your nose can soothe irritation.

Your grandmother may have been right: The heat, fluid, and salt in chicken soup may also help you fight infection. Some people fight colds with alternative therapies, such as echinacea or vitamin C. Check with your doctor before you try these, since some herbs and supplements can actually trigger asthma.

Monitor Your Asthma Symptoms

Keep a close watch over asthma symptoms while you're sick. If your coughing or wheezing worsens, breathing problems wake you up at night, or regular activities are limited, follow the steps in your asthma Action Plan or talk with your doctor. He or she can tell you how to adjust your existing medications to control cold symptoms.

When it comes to colds and asthma, prevention is the best medicine. To keep healthy, stay away from people who are sick, wash your hands frequently, and don't touch your eyes and nose. If your symptoms get worse or severe, contact your doctor promptly.



Jump-Start Your Weight-Loss Program

Your doctor told you losing weight would help your asthma. You've heard extra pounds worsen your symptoms and keep your medications from working like they should. You've worked with your health care team to get your disease under control and are ready for the next step—starting a weight-loss program.

But how do you turn your good intentions into fat-melting reality? Losing weight comes down to one simple equation: Using more calories than you take in. You can do this by eating less, exercising more, or, for best results, both.

Healthy Eating 101

A good first step is calculating the number of calories you'll need. Each pound of fat contains approximately 3,500 calories. So if you want to drop a pound a week, you'll need to eat or drink 500 fewer calories a day, burn 500 calories a day, or try a combination of eating less and burning more calories.

Figure in exercise, too, for a final goal. Don't go lower than 1,500 calories a day for men or 1,200 for women without your doctor's OK.

Choose the right foods, and you'll eat less without feeling hungry—plus give your body the nutrients it needs to stay healthy and manage your asthma. Here are some general guidelines:

- **Eat more fruits and veggies.** Include a wide variety of whole fruits—more nutritious and filling than juices—and different-colored vegetables.
- **Choose whole grains at least half the time.** Check ingredients on pasta, bread, crackers, and rice. Select products containing whole wheat, rice, oats, or corn.
- **Limit saturated fat, trans fat, and sodium.**
- **Don't skip meals, especially breakfast.** Eating more frequently can help you control



cravings and prevent overeating later in the day.

- **You can still eat out, even at fast-food restaurants.** Just make wiser choices. Skip high-fat french fries and salad dressings and go for grilled foods, salads, and salsa. Split meals with a friend to keep portions under control.
- **Watch your liquid calories.** Sip water instead of soda, juice, or alcohol. Sulfites in beer and wine can also trigger asthma symptoms.

Don't Let Asthma Keep You Inactive

Many people need to exercise moderately about 45 minutes a day in order to lose weight. This


side of the equation is often challenging for people with asthma because physical activity can aggravate symptoms.

Talk with your doctor about the best way to control asthma so you can get—and stay—moving. He or she might prescribe medications to take before, during, or after exercise. In addition:

- **Choose activities you enjoy and will stick with.** Swimming at an indoor pool is ideal because its damp, humid atmosphere is easy on your lungs. It also tones your entire body. Sports with stop-and-go energy—think baseball, football, and golf—may be less likely to cause breathing problems than distance running. Also try walking, biking, or hiking.
- **Slowly build up your activity level over time.** And before each workout, warm up for 10 minutes with walking or gentle flexibility moves. Easing into exercise may reduce extra stress on your lungs.
- **Avoid other asthma triggers while exercising.** If cold air brings on symptoms, take your winter workouts indoors or wear a scarf or mask. During warmer weather, watch pollen counts and avoid outdoor activity when levels are high. Work out away from busy roads to reduce exposure to pollution.

Asthma hasn't stopped many Olympic athletes—in fact, they're more likely to have the condition than the general population. Even if your goal is a few numbers on the scale rather than a gold medal, asthma shouldn't hold you back.

Soothe Stress with These Strategies



Whether it's a public performance, a traffic jam, or an illness or a death in the family, you might find it harder to breathe during tense or difficult situations. It's not all in your head—studies show stress can trigger asthma symptoms.

Life will always be full of challenges, large and small. These methods can help you cope and keep your airways clear:

1. **Think positively.** The American Psychological Association suggests viewing nerve-racking events as opportunities. Concerned about your job? Try learning a new skill.
2. **Make a plan.** Instead of dwelling on problems, find ways to deal with and overcome them. For instance, if money is the trouble, write down ways your family can manage your expenses.
3. **Go off-line.** Taking a break from your routine can refresh your mind and body. Take a vacation if you can, meditate, garden, or lose yourself in a favorite song or book. Try to find at least 15 to 30 minutes a day to do the things you enjoy most.
4. **Work it out.** Exercise is one of the best stress-busters. It loosens tense muscles and produces feel-good chemicals in your body called endorphins. Talk with your doctor if physical activity makes your symptoms worse—medications, proper warm-up, or a different type of exercise could work for you.
5. **Get help.** If you're truly overwhelmed, visit a psychologist or therapist. He or she can teach you new ways to work through tough times.



Dander. Tiny pieces of skin or scales that are shed by animals. The animals' oil glands secrete protein on the dander, and many humans have allergic reactions to these proteins. Most people with pet allergies are allergic to pet dander, not the animals themselves.

Decongestants. Usually available in the form of a pill, nasal spray, or drop, decongestants decrease blood flow in your nose's lining. This reduces nose tissue swelling, making more space in your nose for air to travel. This helps you breathe in and out more easily.

Endorphins. Released during physical activity, endorphins improve your mood and relax you. This is why exercise can be a good way to reduce stress.

Hypoallergenic. Not likely to cause an allergic reaction. For example, hypoallergenic bedding helps keep dust, pet dander, and other allergens from collecting and causing nighttime flare-ups.

Help or Hype? Natural Remedies to Tame Symptoms

You see them in ads and on the shelves of health-food stores. But can alternative therapies really ease your asthma symptoms? Find out with this quiz.

Fact or Fiction?

1. No herbs or supplements have been shown to help asthma. It's all "junk science."
2. You should not tell your doctor if you're using these therapies.
3. Certain supplements that claim to help asthma could make your symptoms worse.

Answers:

1. Fiction. According to the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology, some natural remedies may help people cope with symptoms. Studies have focused on traditional Chinese herbs, including ginkgo biloba. In the right combination, these plant extracts may boost the immune system and helping airways from swelling. Other therapies include:

- Magnesium
- Choline
- Fish oil
- Vitamin A

However, more research is needed to confirm the benefits.

2. Fiction. The *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology* recommends you



always talk with your doctor before trying any treatment, natural or otherwise. Some herbs can interact with your current medications, making breathing more difficult or causing new health problems.

Share a list of treatments you use with your doctor. Be clear on whether you are trying these therapies instead of the medicines you were prescribed or if you're combining alternative and conventional treatments.

3. Fact. Though some supplements prove helpful, use caution, especially if your asthma is allergic. Therapies derived from plants can cause skin rashes or respiratory symptoms. For example, echinacea is in the same family as ragweed. It can trigger allergies in those with hay fever. Green tea has been linked to coughs. Talk with your doctor if you have nasal, sinus, or other respiratory problems after taking natural remedies.

Can Weather Make You Feel Sick?

Rain, rain, go away ... if you have asthma, you might sing this rhyme more often. When it's cold, wet, or windy outside, or when the weather changes very quickly, you might have more symptoms.

Don't let Old Man Winter or his friend Jack Frost get you down. Here's how you can feel better, rain or shine.



Dress up.

When it's cold, wear clothes that keep you warm. Cover your face with a ski mask. Or wrap a scarf around your face and nose to keep from breathing in cold air.



Change your plans.

Skiing, ice-skating, or running outside might be fun. But if they make you feel bad, ask your friends to do something else. Try going for a dip in an indoor pool. The warm, wet air is good for your lungs.



Talk with an adult.

Tell your parents or another trusted grown-up if you're outside and don't feel well. If you have trouble breathing, can't stop coughing, or have a tight feeling in your chest, speak up.



Keep your medicine handy.

Your doctor will explain how to use your inhaler and spacer. Take them along into the great outdoors.



You might have heard that moving to a different place can help your asthma. But don't ask your parents to pack the moving truck just yet. Even if a new place eases your symptoms

for part of the year, they could be worse at other times. Instead, listen to your doctor and follow your treatment plan to feel better whatever the weather.

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