

Asthma: Questions to Ask When It Doesn't Get Better

My asthma doesn't seem to be getting better. What can I do?

Sometimes despite efforts to treat your asthma, you end up back in the doctor's office or the emergency room, wheezing and coughing. Don't get discouraged. By asking the following questions, you and your doctor can start to figure out what's going wrong.

#1: Is it something in my environment?

Many people with asthma are allergic to something in their environment (at home, work or school). Getting rid of the things you're allergic to can help your asthma medicine work better.

Common triggers of an asthma attack are dust mites, pet dander, cockroaches, mold and pollen. Your doctor can use skin or blood tests to figure out which triggers are causing your asthma. Other triggers include viral infections (such as colds), tobacco smoke, certain pollutants, exercise and cold, dry air.

Avoiding triggers can make the symptoms of asthma get better and help your lungs work better. It might even reduce the amount of medicine you have to take. Talk with your doctor about ways to remove triggers from your home.

#2: Is it something in my workplace?

Some adults with asthma are sensitive to something in their workplace. You might suspect that something at work is causing your asthma to flare up if some of your coworkers also have asthma symptoms. Another clue is if your asthma symptoms get better on weekends or vacations. Your doctor can help you figure out if something at work is triggering your symptoms. When you find out what the trigger is, you can try to stay away from it.

#3: Is it because I'm not taking my medicine the right way?

In order for your medicine to work, you must take it the way your doctor tells you to. Many people with asthma don't follow their doctor's advice about taking their medicine. Many trips to the hospital and most asthma deaths could be prevented if patients would take their medicines as prescribed by their doctor.

#4: Is it because I don't know enough about asthma?

Learning how to manage your asthma is very important. Talk about your asthma with your doctor. Ask questions if you don't understand something. Your doctor can help you learn to control your asthma symptoms.

#5: Is it because I don't know how bad my asthma is?

It's hard to believe, but most people with asthma don't know how bad their asthma really is.

A peak flow meter – a plastic tube that you blow into several times a day – may help you. It shows how well your lungs are working by measuring the amount of air you can quickly blow out of your lungs. Keeping track of this measurement at home can tell you when you may need to take extra medicine or call your doctor. Your doctor can teach you how to use a peak flow meter and what the results mean.

#6: Is it because I'm not using my inhaler the right way?

Asthma inhalers may not be used correctly. As a result, many people don't get enough medicine into their lungs.

A simple device called a spacer helps more of the medicine get deeper into your lungs, where it's needed. Ask your doctor about getting a spacer, and have him or her show you how to use it the right way.

#7: Do I need to change medicines?

There are many medicines to use for asthma. If the medicines you take now don't seem to be helping, other medicines might work better. Many people with asthma need at least one preventive (or "controller") medicine every day to keep their lungs from becoming inflamed, plus a quick-relief medicine to inhale if the preventive medicine doesn't completely get rid of their symptoms.

If your asthma is related to allergies, then allergy shots (also called immunotherapy) might help you. Ask your doctor about this treatment.

#8: Is it really asthma?

Other illnesses can act like asthma. If your asthma treatments haven't helped you, maybe you don't have asthma. Your doctor may want to do other exams or tests to be sure.