

Asthma: Taking Medicines Safely

Why should I be careful about taking medicine?

Some medicines might make your asthma worse. Not all people with asthma have a problem with medicines. It's important to know about the following medicines in case you have a problem.

What about aspirin and other pain relievers?

Aspirin and drugs called nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) may be harmful in people with asthma. Ibuprofen (one brand name: Motrin), naproxen (brand name: Aleve) and ketoprofen (brand name: Orudis KT) are examples of NSAIDs. If you are allergic to aspirin, ask your doctor or pharmacist to make sure any new medicine you might take is not related to aspirin.

Most times, acetaminophen (brand name: Tylenol) can be taken by people with asthma. This medicine is used for fever and pain. Very rarely, even acetaminophen may make asthma worse. If this happens to you, tell your doctor.

What about antihistamines for my allergies?

Antihistamines are safe for people with asthma to use, but they can cause side effects. Some antihistamines can't be taken with certain other medicines. Before you start taking any new medicine, make sure your doctor or pharmacist knows which antihistamine you're taking.

What about medicines for blood pressure?

Beta blockers are drugs used to control blood pressure and heart disease. Sometimes they are given to people who have anxiety or headaches. This group of drugs includes propranolol (brand name: Inderal), atenolol (brand name: Tenormin) and metoprolol (brand names: Lopressor, Toprol). All of the drugs in this group can make asthma worse. If you have started taking a beta blocker and your asthma gets worse, tell your doctor.

ACE inhibitors are another type of medicine given to treat blood pressure, heart disease and, sometimes, diabetes. Drugs such as captopril (brand name: Capoten), enalapril (brand name: Vasotec) and lisinopril (brand names: Prinivil, Zestril) are included in this group. These medicines appear to be safe for people with asthma. However, some people cough when taking ACE inhibitors.

If you start coughing while you're taking an ACE inhibitor, remember that the cough might not be caused by your asthma. If the cough is caused by the ACE inhibitor, it will usually go away a week or so after you stop taking the ACE inhibitor. If you get a cough or have other problems that make you think your asthma is worse, call your doctor to see if you should stop taking your ACE inhibitor.

What about contrast dye for x-rays?

Sometimes when you have an x-ray, you have to get a shot of contrast dye to make the x-ray picture show up. Some contrast dyes might make your asthma worse. It's very important that you tell your doctor or the x-ray technician that you have asthma.

Sometimes they can give you another medicine before you get the contrast dye, so the dye won't cause you problems.

What about other medicines I'm taking?

Any medicine can cause wheezing or shortness of breath if you're allergic to it. If you notice that your asthma gets worse every time you take a certain medicine, tell your doctor as soon as possible. If you use a peak flow meter to check your asthma, remember to use it if you think your asthma is worse. If you see changes in your peak flow readings after you take a certain medicine, tell your doctor. Your doctor can decide if your medicine should be changed.

Asthma Medications

What medications are used to treat asthma?

Most people with asthma need 2 kinds of asthma medicine: 1 for quick relief and 1 for long-term control.

Everyone with asthma needs a quick-relief medicine to stop asthma attacks. Many people also need a preventive medicine, or controller, every day to protect the lungs and keep asthma attacks from starting.

Make sure you have a written treatment plan from your doctor and understand how to follow it.

How safe are preventive medicines for asthma?

Preventive medicine makes the airways less swollen. Preventive medicines for asthma are safe to use every day. You will not become addicted to these medicines even if you use them for many years.

Your doctor may tell you to take preventive medicine every day if:

- You cough, wheeze or have a tight chest more than once a week.
- You wake up at night because of asthma.
- You have many asthma attacks.
- You have to use quick-relief medicine every day to stop asthma attacks.

Be prepared. Always have asthma medicine.

Always carry your quick-relief asthma medicine with you when you leave home. Follow the instructions in the box on the next page.

Act fast if an asthma attack starts.

Know the signs that an asthma attack is starting:

- Coughing
- Wheezing

- Tight chest
- Waking up at night

If you know what started the attack, avoid it if you can.

Use your quick-relief asthma medicine.

Stay calm for 1 hour to be sure breathing gets better.

What if I don't get better?

Get emergency help from your doctor if you do not get better.

Call your doctor or seek emergency care if you see any of these asthma danger signs:

- Your quick-relief medicine does not help for very long or it does not help at all.
- Breathing is still fast and hard.
- It is hard to walk or talk.
- Lips or fingernails turn gray or blue.
- Your nose opens wide when you breathe.
- Skin is pulled in around the ribs and neck when you breathe.
- Your heartbeat or pulse is very fast.

Can I use the quick-relief medicine too much?

Quick-relief medicine for asthma makes you feel better for a while. It may stop the attack. With some attacks, you may think you are getting better but the airways are getting more and more swollen. Then you are in danger of having a very bad asthma attack that could kill you.

If you use quick-relief medicine every day to stop asthma attacks, this means you need a preventive medicine for long-term control.

How to Use a Spray Inhaler

Without a spacer

1. Take off the cap. Shake the inhaler.
1. Stand up. Breathe out.
1. Put the inhaler in your mouth or put it just in front of your mouth. As you start to breathe in, push down on the top of the inhaler and keep breathing in slowly.
1. Hold your breath for 10 seconds. Breathe out.

With a spacer

(A spacer, or a holding chamber, makes it easier to use a spray inhaler.)

1. Put the open end of the spacer in your mouth.
1. Spray the asthma medicine into the spacer one time.
1. Take a deep breath and hold it for 10 seconds.
1. Breathe out into the spacer.
1. Breathe in again, but do not spray the medicine again.

Adapted from "What you and your family can do about asthma," a patient information booklet published by the Global Initiative for Asthma, a joint effort of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute and the World Health Organization. This and other publications are available through the Internet (<http://www.ginasthma.com>).