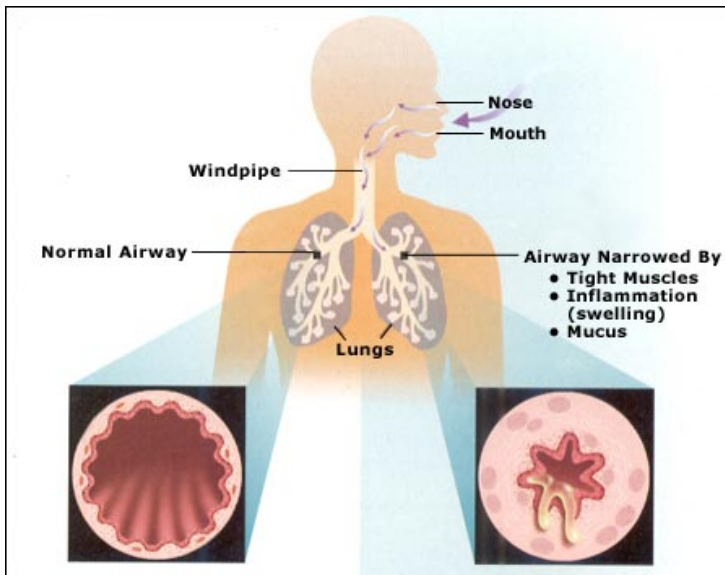


Health Bites - Asthma

What Is Asthma?

Asthma is a long-term disease that affects the air passages in the lungs. Air passages are tiny breathing tubes that carry air in and out of the lungs. People who suffer from asthma have very sensitive air passages, especially when they are exposed to the things they are allergic to.

During asthma attack, the air passages swell and narrow easily. A lot of sticky mucus produced in the air passages and caused blockage to the tiny breathing tubes of the lungs. This allows little air moving in and out of the narrow air passages causing tightness in the chest, wheezing, difficulty in breathing and cough.



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Asthma Attacks

What are the symptoms of asthma attack?

Asthma symptoms are usually more active at night, when waking up in the early morning or after exercise. The asthma symptoms are:

- Coughing due to mucus irritating the breathing tubes.
- Shortness of breath due to blockage of air passing through the narrow breathing tubes.
- Chest tightness feeling when the lung muscles are tightened.
- Noisy breathing (wheeze).

Is asthma attack dangerous?

Yes, asthma attack can be a life threatening condition. When you have difficulty in breathing, there is a risk that you may receive less or no oxygen to the brain especially during a serious

attack. This may cause permanent brain damage or death if you do not get to the doctor quickly.

Most asthma deaths are preventable if you follow your doctor's instructions to use your preventive medicines regularly. You should not stop asthma treatment on your own.

When do you need to seek doctor's advice?

It is important to recognise your asthma symptoms before it becomes serious. You should see your doctor early when:

- You need to use reliever more often than usual.
- Your asthma symptoms are not relieved quickly by the reliever.
- You have difficulty in talking and breathing.
- Your sleep is disturbed by asthma symptoms.
- You have persistent cough for more than one week.
- **Your lips colour turn grey or blue, it is an emergency case. You should call 995 for an ambulance immediately.**

Anti-Asthma Medicines

How do anti-asthma medicines work?

Currently there is no permanent cure for asthma but you can treat and control asthma very effectively with anti-asthma medicines. They are divided into a few groups:

- A. Preventers
- B. New combination preventers
- C. Quick relievers
- D. Rescue steroid tablets

A. *Preventers:*

Preventers are long-term preventive medicine to be taken every day. They control swelling in the air passages and make them less sensitive to asthma triggers. They make asthma attacks less frequent and less severe.

Steroid inhalers are the most effective preventers used to avoid asthma attacks and reduce asthma deaths. They deliver medicine directly to the air passages to treat the main problems in the lungs.

Steroid inhalers:

- Usually brown and orange in colour. Some examples are Pulmicort and Flixotide.
- Can only be effective when is inhaled on a daily basis even if you do not have asthma symptoms.
- Work slowly to reduce mucus and control swelling in the air passages.
- The slow preventive effect may take up to 4 weeks to work.
- **NOT** for treating acute asthma attack because of the slow effect.



Steroid inhalers (preventers)

B. New combination preventers

The new combination preventer combines both the preventer and long-acting reliever in a single device.

- Red and Purple inhalers.
Examples are Symbicort and Seretide.
- Effective only when inhaled on a daily basis even if you do not have asthma symptoms.
- Control swelling in the air passages.
- Prevent asthma attacks and asthma deaths.
- They are indicated when steroid inhalers alone are not effective.



New combination preventers

C. Quick relievers:

Everyone with asthma needs a quick reliever to quickly stop your asthma symptoms to let you breathe easier. They relax the tightened air passages during an asthma attack.

- Usually blue inhalers.
Examples are Ventolin and Bricanyl.
- Work **temporary** to stop asthma attack.
- Will **NOT** prevent asthma attacks and asthma deaths.
- Will **NOT** reduce mucus and control swelling in the air passages of the lungs.
- Will **NOT** make the air passages less sensitive to asthma triggers.



Quick relievers

D. Rescue steroids tablets

Short courses of steroid tablets, also called rescue steroids, are necessary to treat acute asthma attacks. They are usually prescribed for 1 to 2 weeks

During an asthma attack, steroid tablets are given to quickly control swelling and reduce mucus in the air passages to prevent severe asthma attack. The prescribed steroid tablets given by your doctor are completely different from the anabolic steroids abused by the sportsmen to boost their metabolism.



Rescue steroid tablets

Please consult your doctor if your condition does not improve after a short course of steroid treatment.

Are there any side effects from steroid tablets and steroid inhalers (preventers)?

Most people are worried of the side effects of steroids. But the truth is we have natural steroids in our body. When your doctor gives you steroid inhaler or steroid tablets, they are added to this natural steroid to help reduce the mucus in the air passages and prevent serious asthma attack.

Side effects of steroid tablets:

- During acute asthma attack, short course of steroid tablets are given to save life rather than cause harm to your body.
- You may have a good appetite and may even gain weight after taking short course of steroids. Such effects are temporary and will stop when you complete the treatment.
- Only a very small number of people with troublesome asthma symptoms, who need to take long- term steroids tablets over months or years, will have serious side effects. These include osteoporosis, high blood pressure, cataract, weight gain, bruising and prone to infection.
- There is a much greater risk of side effects when taken small doses of steroid tablets over a long period than high doses for 1- 2 weeks.

Side effects of steroid inhalers (preventers):

- Side effects are uncommon, mild and temporary.
- Possible side effects are hoarse voice and throat irritation. You can avoid by rinsing your throat well after inhaling the medicine.
- The dose of inhaled steroid per day is a lot smaller and the side effects are less frequent and less severe than steroid tablets.

For example, 2 puffs of Pulmicort inhaler (200 micrograms) a day delivers 400 micrograms of inhaled steroid. In acute asthma attack, six 5 milligrams of steroid tablets a day will be given- 30,000 micrograms , 75 times more than inhaled steroid.



Steroid tablets and steroid inhalers

Why must I use my steroid inhaler every day even when I am well?

Even when you feel well, the mucus and swelling continues in the air passages. If you stop using your steroid inhaler, the air passages in the lungs become more swollen and produce a lot of sticky mucus. Therefore you are at risk of having an asthma attack if you are exposed to the things you are allergic to.

This is because the effect of the steroid inhaler is slow. It may take up to 4 weeks before it is fully effective in controlling swelling and reducing mucus in the air passages.

Common Asthma Triggers

What are some of the common asthma triggers and how can you avoid them?

Asthma triggers or allergens are anything that can bring on an asthma attack when you come into close contact with them (directly or indirectly). Different people have different asthma triggers.

These are some common asthma triggers or allergens, which you can try to avoid by taking the following preventive measures.

Asthma Triggers	Do's	Don'ts
House dust/ Dust mites and Mould	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Get another person to mop/ vacuum room regularly ✓ Use damp cloth to clean furniture regularly ✓ Keep furniture that are easily cleaned/ maintained e.g. PVC, leather ✓ Keep soft toys in enclosed cupboards ✓ Wash bed linens weekly in hot water (60 c) ✓ Use synthetic or foam pillows ✓ Use mite proof pillow and mattress cover ✓ Have another person to clean air conditioner filters regularly ✓ Allow adequate ventilation at home 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Use bloom to sweep floor ✗ Put carpets at home ✗ Clean / vacuum carpets ✗ Use pillows that are made of feathers ✗ Pack or unpack dusty boxes/ things ✗ Clean air conditioner filters
Infections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Drink more water, eat more fresh fruits and stay healthy ✓ See your doctor early if you are unwell, develops fever or flu ✓ Start asthma action plan early to prevent severe asthma attack 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Go to crowded places
Cigarette smoking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Don't smoke ✓ Stop smoking if you do ✓ Stay away from people who smoke around you 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Go to smoky places
Pets, animals with fur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Stay away from pets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Keep pets at home, especially cats ✗ Allow pets to enter your bedroom ✗ Bathe pets
Medicines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Let your doctor and pharmacist know that you have asthma ✓ Consult your doctor before taking any new medicines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Take NSAIDS pain killers e.g. Ponstan, Voltaren, Synflex etc ✗ Take high blood pressure medicines e.g. Propranolol, Atenolol etc
Food and food additives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Eat healthy food and balanced diet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Eat food / citrus fruits that have caused complications in the

		past * Eat preserved foods e.g. salted vegetables
Strong smell, spray products	✓ Stay away from places where there are strong paints, smell or fumes	* Use strong perfumes, detergent or spray products
Exercise, sports	✓ Use reliever inhaler 15 minutes before exercise ✓ Exercise when you are feeling well	* Try strenuous and water sports e.g. diving * Exercise when you are not feeling well

Are Anti-Asthma Medicines Safe For Pregnant Women?

Anti-asthma medicines such as quick reliever, steroid inhaler and short-course steroid tablets are safe for pregnant women.

If you use your inhaled steroid inhaler every day according to your doctor's instructions, it will help to reduce the risk of life-threatening attack for both mother and the growing baby.

Please consult your doctor for more advice regarding asthma treatment during pregnancy.

What Is Asthma Action Plan?

Asthma Action Plan is a good guide to help you become an expert in managing your asthma. The plan will:

- * Help you to recognise your asthma symptoms early.
- * Guide you to adjust your medications early according to your doctor's instructions to prevent severe attack.
- * Warn you when to seek emergency help.

Please discuss with your doctor for more details if you do not have an Asthma Action Plan.

For more information on asthma, you can contact:

Asthma Association

336 Smith Street
06- 302 New Bridge Centre
Singapore 050336
Telephone: 6323 1718
E-mail: asthma@pacific.net.sg
Website: www.asthma-association.org.sg

Healthline

1800 223 1313 (for personal advice during office hours)
1800 848 1313 (24 hour pre recording health information)