

# Your Guide to Managing **SEVERE ASTHMA**

About 5 to 10% of people with asthma don't respond to standard treatment. They may continue to have symptoms during the day and wake up at night due to their asthma. This is called *severe persistent asthma*.



Severe asthma can have a significant emotional, social and financial impact. It can interfere with daily activities and can be debilitating.

But most of the time, asthma symptoms get better with the right treatment. The goal of asthma treatment is to reduce asthma episodes and gain back activities asthma may have kept you from doing.

## **Common asthma symptoms are:**

- Coughing
- Whistling or wheezing sound when you breathe
- Shortness of breath
- Tight feeling in your chest

### **People with severe persistent asthma:**

- Have asthma symptoms during the day
- Often wake up every night because of asthma

### **People with uncontrolled asthma:**

- Have daytime symptoms two or more times a week
- Wake up at night more than two times per month

Your doctor will perform a physical exam and lung function tests to tell if you have severe asthma. Tracking the frequency of your asthma symptoms and how often you use your medicines will also help you get the right diagnosis.

# CONTROLLING TRIGGERS

Controlling asthma triggers in your home, work and school environments can reduce your chances of having asthma episodes or attacks. Some of the most common triggers are:



**Activities:** exercise, laughing, crying, having strong emotions



**Allergens:** anything that causes an allergic reaction (pollen, mold, dust mites, animal dander, etc.)



**Foods or medicines:** foods with sulfites, aspirin, ibuprofen



**Illnesses or medical conditions:** colds, flu, heartburn



**Irritants:** smoke, odor, perfume, cleaners, smog (air pollution)



**Weather:** weather changes, hot or cold weather, storms

If you have severe asthma, it's important to know what triggers your asthma and make a plan to control those triggers. Review your environmental control plan regularly.

## What to bring to every appointment:

- Your current Asthma Action Plan
- All of your current medicines (even if they aren't for asthma) and supplements
- Your asthma devices (inhalers, spacers, chambers, nebulizers or peak flow meters)
- A log of your recent asthma symptoms
- A list of your questions and concerns

# TYPE 2 ASTHMA

There are different types of asthma. Type 2 is most common in people with severe asthma. Type 2 asthma is:

- Persistent airway inflammation, even with inhaled steroids
- Usually more severe
- More common in older people

Type 2 asthma is caused by allergic asthma and/or eosinophilic [EE-oh-sin-oh-FILL-ick] asthma. Allergic asthma symptoms are caused by exposure to an allergen. Treating your allergies may improve your asthma.

Eosinophilic asthma is a type of asthma caused by too many eosinophils in the lungs. An eosinophil is a type of white blood cell that normally occurs in your immune system. But when there are too many of them, they can cause inflammation in your airways.

# MANAGING SEVERE ASTHMA

An asthma management plan helps you control your asthma. Your asthma management plan will cover four areas:

- Knowing your asthma triggers and minimizing contact with them
- Taking your asthma medicines as prescribed
- Tracking your asthma and recognizing early signs that it might be getting worse
- Knowing what to do if your asthma is getting worse

You should have an Asthma Action Plan as part of your management plan. It will include your daily medicine plan, what long-term control medicine to take, what quick-relief medicine to take, what to do when you have symptoms and what to do in an asthma emergency.

## Your Asthma Action Plan has three zones:



**Green Zone:** your breathing is good, no coughing or wheezing, can do normal activities

**Yellow Zone:** you have symptoms, were exposed to a trigger or are sick with a cold or respiratory illness

**Red Zone:** asthma emergency, medicine is not helping - seek emergency care right away!

Severe asthma can be an ever-changing condition. Your doctor may change treatments as your asthma changes. That means your Asthma Action Plan can change often as well.

It's easy to get busy or forget to pay attention to the warning signs of an asthma episode. But when you do find yourself in the Yellow Zone, try not to spend too much time there. Don't wait until you have Red Zone symptoms to take action.

The greatest risk factor for having another asthma attack is having a previous one.

# AFTER AN ASTHMA ATTACK OR EPISODE

After you have an asthma episode or emergency, make an appointment to see your doctor within two days of an emergency department visit or hospitalization. Also think about possible reasons for the asthma episode – such as forgetting to take long-term control medicine, being exposed to triggers or spending several days in the Yellow Zone. Come up with ways to overcome them.



Set a daily alarm as a reminder to take your long-term control medicines.



Review ways to reduce contact with asthma triggers and irritants.



Watch for early warning signs and symptoms and start Yellow Zone treatment without delay.



Contact your doctor if you are in the Yellow Zone for more than 48 hours, if you are getting worse or if your quick-relief medicine is not relieving your symptoms.

## ASTHMA TREATMENTS

Medicines are a necessary part of asthma control. There are two types of asthma medicines – long-term control and quick-relief.

**Long-term control medicines** prevent symptoms. Use them as prescribed, even when you have no symptoms.

**Quick-relief medicines** are very important for treating asthma episodes or urgent asthma symptoms. Carry your quick-relief medicine with you at all times.



### Long-Term Control Medicines

- Inhaled corticosteroids (ICS)
- Inhaled long-acting beta agonists (LABAs)
- Combination inhaled medicines
- Leukotriene modifiers
- Theophylline
- Cromolyn sodium
- Biologics

### Quick-Relief Medicines

- Short-acting beta agonists (SABAs)
- Anticholinergics [*ann-tie-KOH-lynn-ER-jix*]
- Combination quick-relief medicines
- Oral corticosteroids (OCS)

## Oral Corticosteroids

Oral corticosteroids (OCS) – like prednisone – may be prescribed for the treatment of asthma attacks that don't respond to other quick-relief asthma medicines. But they can cause significant short-term and long-term side effects. Long-term side effects associated with OCS include cataracts, diabetes, brittle bones, infections and more. Some emergency situations require the use of OCS for quick relief. But if you take OCS more than once a year, your asthma is not under control.

## Biologics

Biologics may be the most effective option for people with some types of severe asthma not controlled with standard asthma treatments alone. They have also been shown to reduce the use of OCS. Biologics are shots or infusions that target a cell or protein in your body to prevent airway inflammation.

# ASTHMA CONTROL

For anyone with asthma, especially severe asthma, getting it under control is the primary goal. Uncontrolled asthma can lead to permanent lung damage and OCS overuse which can have serious long-term effects.

Use the Rules of Two® to tell if your asthma is well-controlled.



Do you take your quick-relief inhaler **more than two times** a week?



Do you awaken at night with asthma **more than two times** a month?



Do you refill your quick-relief inhaler **more than two times** a year?



Do you measure your peak flow at **less than two times 10 (20%)** from baseline with asthma symptoms?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, work with your asthma care provider to create a new plan to control your asthma.

## IMPACT OF SEVERE ASTHMA

People with severe uncontrolled asthma report higher rates of negative impact on various areas of their lives – such as physical health, work, school, relationships and finances. But there is hope. You are not alone.

There are ways you can ease the impact of severe asthma:

- Form an asthma support team of doctors, family, friends, co-workers, etc.
- Find support from people who understand
- Find financial assistance – pharmaceutical assistance programs, drug discount programs
- Work with your employer or school for accommodations
- Know your options – Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA), 504 plans

The Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America (AAFA) has many resources available to help you manage the impact of severe asthma.

AAFA has a free online asthma support community. It is monitored so you can get support in an encouraging environment. To join, visit [aafa.org/join](https://aafa.org/join).

**Learn more about managing severe asthma at:**  
[aafa.org/severeasthmacare](https://aafa.org/severeasthmacare)



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