

When a Child Has Asthma

Pediatric asthma is the most common chronic childhood disease, affecting more than 5 million children in America. While symptoms may subside in the teens and early twenties, they usually return later in life. Upper respiratory tract infections and smoke are common triggers of pediatric episodes. All family members need to understand what triggers these episodes and what to do when they occur.

Creating a healthier environment

- Do not allow smoking in the home. Smoke, including secondhand smoke, is a severe irritant, especially for children.
- If you have pets, restrict them to certain rooms, or to the outdoors; the child's room should be a "pet-free zone."
- Use a damp cloth for household dusting so irritants do not become airborne.
- Air conditioning can help remove airborne irritants, especially pollen. Even a window unit in the child's bedroom will help. Be sure filters are changed regularly.
- Try to make your home as stress-free as possible. Excitement or anxiety can trigger asthma episodes.
- Make sure that the child knows where his or her medications are kept, and how to take them. If the dosing schedule seems confusing, create a color-coded chart to make it easier to understand.
- Be aware of the child's food allergies and avoid having such foods in your house.
- In the bedroom, use pillows with synthetic fillings, washable cotton or synthetic blankets, and allergen-proof covers for the mattress and box spring.
- Prevent dust from collecting in the child's room by removing upholstered furniture, heavy draperies, and thick rugs.
- Wood, plastic, or metal toys are less likely to collect allergens. If children have "cuddly" toys, choose items that can be washed.
- Help the child avoid direct contact with those who are sick, and encourage frequent hand washing.

Managing an asthma episode at home

In spite of your efforts and good intentions, it is still likely that a child will have an asthma episode at home. If so:

- Be aware of warning signs, so you can take action early.
- If possible, remove or reduce the irritant that caused the episode.

- Follow the doctor's orders regarding the proper dose and timing of the child's medication.
- Stay calm; if you seem nervous or frightened, the child may become frightened too—making the episode worse.
- Encourage the child to remain calm so you can see if the action you've taken is working.
- If you have a peak flow meter, check the child's peak flow rate 5 or 10 minutes after treatment to see if air flow is improving.
- If you need help, call a friend, neighbor, or family member.
- Contact the doctor if necessary.

When to seek medical care

Here are some ways to tell whether emergency treatment is needed:

- Wheezing, coughing, and shortness of breath get worse, even after medication has had time to work.
- Signs indicate breathing difficulty. The child may seem to struggle for breath, hunch over, or suck in chest or neck muscles with each attempt to breathe.
- The child has trouble walking or talking.
- The child's lips or fingernails turn gray or blue.

When you and your family know what to expect and what to do, it's easier to help a child cope with asthma. A complete program of allergen removal, proper medication, and peak flow monitoring will help your child manage asthma effectively—and enjoy the activities he or she likes.

Special instructions from the doctor

Emergency contact information

Name _____ Relationship _____ Phone _____
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