

ASTHMA – WHEN BREATHING BECOMES DIFFICULT



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DEAR PATIENT,

When you have asthma, your airways are constantly inflamed. They swell up and become narrow which makes it difficult to breathe. This can be alarming. Many people then need long-term medication. This information is intended to help you and your family members understand your condition and provide you with tips and assistance on how to manage it.

At a glance: asthma

- Asthma is a common condition of the airways. Around one in twenty people has asthma.
- People with asthma react to various triggers by developing inflammation of the airways. Triggers like plant pollen, dust mites, stress or infections can cause respiratory problems.
- There are various treatment options: avoid triggers, take medication only when needed to treat symptoms, long-term medication. In addition: do not smoke, attend asthma classes, learn breathing techniques and exercise regularly.

▶ WHAT IS ASTHMA?

When you have asthma, your airways are constantly inflamed. They swell up and become constricted. This makes it impossible to breathe in and out easily. Experts distinguish between *allergic* and *non-allergic asthma*. Common symptoms are:

- Repeated seizure-like breathlessness
- Wheezing
- Feeling of tightness in the chest
- Coughing with or without the formation of mucus

The symptoms may vary in intensity. There may also be spells with no symptoms. Sudden severe symptoms, coupled with breathlessness, constitute an asthma attack. This can escalate into an emergency.

▶ TRIGGERS OF SYMPTOMS

People with asthma have hypersensitive airways. They react to various triggers:

- **Allergens**
are substances that spark an allergic reaction in human beings. Common allergens are, for instance, plant pollen, dust mites or animal fur.
- **Time of day and season**
often play a role in the course of your condition.
- **Physical exercise**
particularly a sudden switch between relaxation and exertion can constrict the airways.
- **Infections of the airways**
can trigger asthma symptoms.
- **Medication**
which narrows the airways can make the symptoms worse.
- **Feelings**
like, for instance, major stress can cause more severe symptoms.
- **Irritants**
that you inhale at home or when you are on-the-go. Polluted air or tobacco smoke are examples of this kind of irritant.

▶ HOW DO YOU DIAGNOSE ASTHMA?

Asthma and its possible triggers are identified in various examinations:

- Consultations and physical examinations
- Measurements of lung function: A *spirometry* test measures how easily or poorly inhaled air can pass through your airways.
- Allergy tests

▶ TREATMENT

Treatment is tailored to treating your symptoms that may include asthma attacks.

The experts agree: when dealing with allergic asthma, the most important thing is to avoid the trigger as far as possible. If that alone doesn't help, then the next step is medication. Experts primarily recommend medication that can be breathed in – inhaled. This leads to fewer physical side-effects. It's important for you to be shown how to use your inhaler correctly by your doctor or pharmacist.

Reliever medication is available to promptly ease any sudden symptoms. It immediately expands the lung airways. Short-acting *beta-agonist* sprays are particularly suited.

Anyone who needs reliever medication more than twice a week, should start long-term treatment. Children should be able to manage their day-to-day lives without any reliever medication. The main *long-term medication* is inhaled corticosteroids as a spray or powder. It combats the inflammation and the cause of the symptoms. It is important to inhale the cortisone regularly to prevent the inflammation from recurring. Patients who take this on a long-term basis have fewer asthma attacks and are admitted less frequently to hospital. Cortisone can also prevent deaths caused by asthma. If cortisone alone is not enough, other medicines may be added.

Experts recommend additional measures to improve the success of the treatment. They include: not smoking, attending asthma classes, learning self-help techniques to manage breathlessness and regular physical exercise.

▶ WHAT YOU CAN DO

- You can learn to inhale correctly. A further information leaflet is available on inhaling: see grey box.
- It is advisable to monitor yourself. A useful tool is to record your symptoms in an asthma diary. This will give you an overview of the course of your condition.
- Physical exercise does you good. It's important to warm up before any physical exercise and to slowly reduce the exertion level at the end. Talk to your treatment team about what medication you can take if needed.
- You can learn specific breathing techniques, for instance pursed lip breathing. Some body positions facilitate breathing such as the tripod or goalkeeper position.
- Try to give up smoking. This also applies when your child has asthma. Reliable studies show: People with asthma who are less exposed to tobacco smoke had fewer severe asthma attacks and therefore had to be treated less frequently as emergency patients.
- In an asthma class you learn, amongst other things, how to adjust the dose of your medication to your symptoms.

You can attend an asthma management programme (DMP asthma). The goal is to coordinate care by your family doctor and specialists. Talk to your treatment team about this.

▶ MORE INFORMATION

Sources, methodology and other useful links

This Patient Information is based on the latest scientific findings in the National Treatment Guideline "Asthma".

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Methodology and sources: www.patienten-information.de/kurzinformationen/quellen-und-methodik/asthma

Further patient information leaflets on asthma: www.patinfo.org

Contact to self-help groups

You can find out from NAKOS (national contact and information office for the encouragement and support of self-help groups) where there is a self-help group in your area: www.nakos.de, tel.: 030, 3101 8960

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Responsible for the content:
German Agency for Quality in Medicine (ÄZQ)
Joint institution of BÄK and KBV
Fax: 030 4005-2555
E-mail: patienteninformation@azq.de
www.patinfo.org
www.azq.de



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