

Asthma: Eight Questions To Ask When It Doesn't Get Better

My asthma doesn't seem to be getting better. What can I do?

Sometimes, despite the best efforts of you and your doctor to treat your asthma, you end up back in the doctor's office or the emergency room, wheezing and coughing.

But don't get discouraged. By asking the following 8 questions, you and your doctor can start to figure out what's going wrong.

About 10% of all people with asthma have very severe asthma. They don't get as much help from their treatment as they would like. A careful review of these 8 questions can help most people with asthma reduce their symptoms. This will improve their lung function and allow them to perform normally at work, at school and at play.

Question 1: Is it something in my environment?

Half of all adults with asthma--and 85% of children with asthma--are allergic to something in their environment. (Your environment can be your home, your school, your workplace, or any place you spend a lot of time.)

Until you figure out if something in your environment causes your asthma, medicine might not help you much. Getting rid of the allergens or triggers (the things you are allergic to) in your environment can help your medicine work better. Taking 3 or 4 medicines while you are living with asthma allergens is like driving your car with the brakes on--you don't get far!

It isn't too hard to find out if something in the environment triggers (causes) your asthma. Some asthma triggers are pollen, mold, house dust mites, cockroaches or pet dander. Your doctor can find out by using skin tests or blood tests.

It's been proved that avoiding allergy triggers makes the symptoms of asthma get better. Avoiding asthma triggers can also make your lungs work better. It might even reduce the amount of medicine you have to take. Talk with your doctor about ways to remove asthma triggers from your home.

Question 2: Is it something in my workplace?

About 15% of people who start getting asthma symptoms when they are adults are sensitive to something in their workplace. For example, more than 200 workplace chemicals are known to cause asthma.

You might suspect that a chemical at work causes your asthma if some of your co-workers also have asthma symptoms. Another clue is if your asthma symptoms get better on weekends or vacations. Your doctor can help find out if a workplace chemical is responsible for your symptoms. When you find out what the chemical is, you have to stay away from it.

Question 3: Is it because I'm not taking my medicine the right way?

Some asthma medicines, such as steroid sprays, take days or weeks to start working. If you only use them now and then, they can't help you. About 60% of people with asthma don't follow their doctor's advice about taking their asthma medicine. Many trips to the hospital and most asthma deaths could be prevented if patients would take their medicines carefully and regularly.

Something as simple as always taking your medicines the way the doctor tells you can make the difference between feeling good and ending up in the emergency room.

Question 4: Is it because I don't know enough about asthma?

Learning how to manage your disease is very important. If you have asthma, it's good to feel comfortable talking about it with your doctor. Ask your doctor questions if you don't understand something. Your doctor can help you learn to control your symptoms. It may also reduce the cost of your medicine, and make it less likely that you will miss time at work or school. Ask your doctor to suggest things you can read to learn more about asthma.

Question 5: Is it because I don't know how bad my asthma is?

It's hard to believe, but most people with chronic asthma don't know how bad their asthma is.

An inexpensive device called a mini-peak flow meter may help you. This is a plastic tube that you blow into several times a day. It measures the amount of air you can blow out of your lungs. You can use the peak flow meter every day at home. Keeping track of how much air you blow out lets you know when you need to take extra medicine or call your doctor. Your doctor can teach you how to use a peak flow meter and what to do when your asthma gets worse.

Question 6: Is it because I'm not using my inhaler the right way?

Asthma inhalers can be hard to use. Many people with asthma don't use them the

right way. If you aren't using the inhaler the right way, you aren't getting as much medicine into your lungs as you need.

A device called a spacer makes the inhaler easier to use. The spacer helps more of the medicine get deeper into your lungs, where it's needed. Ask your doctor about getting a spacer for your inhaler, and have your doctor show you how to use the inhaler the right way.

Question 7: Do I need to change medicines?

There are a lot of medicines to use for asthma. Each one has different strengths. If the medicine you take now doesn't seem to be helping, another medicine might work better.

Some people whose asthma is triggered by allergies might get help from allergy shots (also called immunotherapy). Ask your doctor about this treatment.

Question 8: Is it really asthma?

Other illnesses can act like asthma. If your asthma treatments haven't helped you, maybe you don't really have asthma. Your doctor may want to give you another exam to be sure.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.