

Managing Asthma for Life

Asthma specialists use a series of guidelines called “the rules of two” to evaluate how well asthma is managed. These rules are based on how often you use your “rescue” inhaler (usually albuterol):

- Do you use your rescue inhaler more than two times in a week?
- Are you wakened from sleep by asthma more than two times in a month?
- Do you use up more than two rescue inhalers in a year?

If you answer “yes” to any of these, it may be time to discuss asthma management with your doctor. Another question to ask yourself is this: “Does asthma stop me from doing what I need or want to do?” Again, if the answer is “yes,” discuss the problem with your doctor.

Asthma, like the people who have it, comes in a large number of varieties. Asthma can even vary from one time of life to another; everyone’s heard of someone who “grew out of” childhood asthma. What most of us haven’t heard is that someone who “outgrew” childhood asthma may face it again in middle age. Each variety of asthma requires different ways of management. Some forms of asthma are mild enough that an occasional use of a rescue inhaler is enough to keep the problem under control. Most forms of asthma require the use of daily medication; these kinds of medications are often referred to as “controller” medications. They come in inhalers, nebulizer solutions, pills, and liquids. Controller medications are usually not helpful unless they are taken regularly (generally once or twice a day).

If you’re already taking a controller medication and your asthma is still out of control, your doctor may suggest using more of the controller medication, using the controller more often, changing the controller medication to a different one, or adding a new medication to what you’re already taking.

If your asthma is well-controlled but you are about to change something in your life, it’s a good idea to talk to your doctor before making that change. Thinking about getting a pet? Check with your doctor to see what effect it might have on your asthma.

Planning to join a sports team or start a new exercise plan? Again, check with your doctor before beginning; he or she may know some ways to keep your lungs working well. **The “Managing Asthma and Athletics” session at Asthma Update 2006 will also be helpful!**

If your asthma has gone from well-controlled to out-of-control, talk to your doctor as soon as possible. Don’t wait until you’re gasping for breath to tell your doctor that your asthma symptoms have been getting worse.

Guidelines like “the rules of two” are important because out-of-control asthma is dangerous. Using a rescue inhaler doesn’t solve the problem; it just reverses part of the problem for a while. Asthma involves both bronchoconstriction, which is a squeezing of the muscles on the outside of the airways, and inflammation, which is irritation and swelling of the inside of the airways. Rescue inhalers only work to relax the muscles on the outside of the airways; they don’t have any effect on the swelling inside the airways. If the problem is the swelling inside the airways, a controller medication can keep that swelling controlled. If the rescue inhaler is used too often, it will not work as well as it once did. **At Asthma Update 2006, you can learn more about asthma medications and how they work in either “Managing Asthma with Medications for Adults” or “Managing Asthma with Medications for Children.”**