What Is the Purpose of an Asthma Action Plan?

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How an Asthma Action Plan May Help Save a Life

When the spring pollen hits and the weather starts warming up, I know I am quickly approaching what, for me, is “asthma season.”

My asthma is mostly allergy caused and so I have the luxury of at least being somewhat prepared for the season. However, asthma can have many triggers to cause a flare.

It’s important for you to know what some of those are and to have a plan for keeping your asthma under control. It’s also important for you to make sure that your friends, family, and co-workers know about your plan and what to do in case of an emergency.

What Can Trigger an Asthma Attack?

- Allergic asthma is when a person’s allergies are triggering asthmatic reactions. Things like dust mites, pollens, molds, and pets can cause allergic asthma.
- Environmental irritants can trigger sensitive airways. This would be things like smoke, pollution, bonfires, chemicals or odors.
- Respiratory illness; the flu, the common cold, pneumonia.
- Exercise, especially in cold air, can be an asthma trigger. If so, talk to your doctor about this as they may suggest a breathing treatment before exercising.
- Medicines, for example, NSAIDs.
- Strong emotions; stress, fear/panic.

What Is an Asthma Action Plan?

Working with your doctor, you should come up with a plan for treating your asthma (and symptoms) depending on how you are feeling. This plan will have a general management portion, and will also have a specific action plan for when your asthma starts to flare and become a problem.

It’s important to have this plan so that not only you but your caregivers as well, know what needs to be done in case of emergency. It also gives you a good idea of how your current treatment and management medications are working.

You should review your plan and medications each time you visit your doctor. This way, if you find that you are living in the “yellow zone” a lot or too much of the time, you can discuss a better plan for staying in the green zone.

How Does an Asthma Action Plan Work?

Here’s how the plan works. Most likely your doctor will have you use a peak flow meter.

A peak flow meter is a portable, inexpensive plastic device you blow into in order to test your ability to push air out of your lungs. The meter will have measurements on it for how many liters per minute you are able to push.

It’s really important that you use this meter correctly in order to achieve the best results. The American Lung Association has put together a video to help guide you.

The Three Zones of an Asthma Action Plan

Your doctor will typically determine three zones of measurement. Many people use a stop light analogy to determine the results. The Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America has some wonderful charts you can download for free to use (you can find this in the resource section of this article).

The Go/Green Zone

Go/Green zone will show a good peak flow (sometimes known as your personal best) and you basically be feeling and breathing well.

During this time, you probably will only need your daily maintenance medicines and/or some form of an inhaler with exercise if that is something you normally do.

The Caution/Yellow Zone

Caution/Yellow zone will be during a time when you are starting to feel the potential for an asthma flare-up. This might be when you are starting with a cold or have been exposed to triggers you know typically affect your asthma (such as smoke or dust).

Your peak flow meter may show lower numbers than usual and you might start to feel some tightness, wheezing or coughing. A quick check in with your nurse or doctor can assure you that all will be well and they may have you go ahead and do some preventive medicines/breathing treatments to prevent any further or more serious issues.

The Danger/Red Zone

The danger/red zone is of utmost importance to be able to identify as this has the potential for your asthma to become an emergency situation. In the red zone, you will not only have low peak flow readings but you will notice that your breathing is difficult and you may even have trouble speaking.

It’s imperative to call your doctor right away and if you cannot get a hold of them, go to the emergency room. **Do not wait.** If you have reached an emergency situation and gone to the ER or been hospitalized, be sure to contact your doctor within a couple of days.

You will want to evaluate what caused this episode and determine if there are steps you can take in the future to prevent it from happening again. You might also need to have adjustments made to your preventive medicines.

Reasons Why You Should Share Your Asthma Action Plan With Loved Ones, Friends or Co-workers

We said before that it’s important that those you are with daily have an idea of your plan. Make sure that if you work outside the home, your boss/close co-worker knows that you have asthma and what they can do to help if you are in need.

Share the plan with them and instruct them on where you keep your rescue inhaler and/or when they should call 911. You may even consider having an extra inhaler in a specified location on your workstation so that anyone could grab it quickly for you if that becomes necessary.

At home, make sure your family knows the specific location to be able to find your rescue inhaler. Also, it would be a good idea to put your family doctor and/or pulmonologist phone number in a prominent place like the refrigerator for everyone to have easy and quick access. Or, better yet, have each family member program the numbers in their cell phone.

Having asthma can be scary. But, if you keep a constant flow of communication with your doctor and follow your asthma plan, you can be sure you are doing all you can to keep it under control.