Occupational Asthma Treatment

Treatment in occupational asthma depends on how severe the asthma is.

- Prevention is always the first choice of treatment. If your asthma is not very severe, prevention may be enough to avoid symptoms. For some people, just avoiding exposure to the trigger is possible and is enough to prevent symptoms; for others, a combination of avoiding the trigger and medication can prevent symptoms.
- People with severe occupational asthma may need to consider changing to a different job or a different line of work.

The goals of treatment are as follows:

- To prevent asthma attacks
- To carry on with normal activities
- To maintain normal or near-normal lung function
- To have as few medication side effects as possible

For more information about treating and living with asthma, see Asthma.

Self-Care at Home

Work with your health care provider to develop an action plan. Follow your treatment plan closely to avoid asthma attacks. If you do have an asthma attack, the action plan will help you control the attack and make the decision about when to seek medical care.

Since occupational asthma is a chronic disease, you will probably require treatment for a very long time, maybe even for the rest of your life. The best way to improve your condition and live your life on your terms is to learn all you can about your asthma and what you can do to make it better.

- Become a partner with your health care provider and his or her support staff. Use the resources they can offer—information, education, and expertise—to help yourself.

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Follow the treatment recommendations of your health care provider. Understand your treatment. If you are taking medication, know what each drug does and how it is used.

See your health care provider as scheduled.

Promptly report any changes or worsening of your symptoms.

Report any side effects you are having with your medications.

Precautions that may help reduce your chance of having an asthma attack include the following:

- Avoid the trigger. In many cases, this doesn't mean you have to quit your job or change your occupation, although you may want to consider that. Most employers will work with you to reduce or remove your exposure to the trigger in the workplace.
- Take your medications as directed.
- If you smoke, quit.

If you should have an asthma attack, move to the next step of your action plan. Keep the following tips in mind:

- Take only the medications your health care provider has prescribed for your asthma. Take them as directed.
- If the medication is not working, do not take more than you have been directed to take. Overusing asthma medications can be dangerous.
- Do not take cough medicine. These medicines do not help asthma and may cause unwanted side effects.
- Do not use nonprescription inhalers. These contain a very short-acting inhaler that may not last long enough to relieve an asthma attack and may cause unwanted side effects.
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- Aspirin and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, such as ibuprofen, can cause asthma to worsen in certain individuals. These medications should not be taken without the advice of your health care provider.
- Do not take any nonprescription preparations, herbs, or supplements, even if they are completely "natural," without talking to your health care provider first. Some of these may have unwanted side effects or interfere with your medications.
- Be prepared to go on to the next step of your action plan if necessary.

If you think your medication is not working, let your health care provider know right away.
Medical Treatment

The most important part of treating occupational asthma is avoiding the trigger.

- Most people assume that means quitting their job and changing their occupation, but this is not always the case.
- Many employers will work with you to reduce or stop your exposure. This may mean changing the way things are done in the workplace overall or it may mean providing extra protection for you. It may mean moving you to a different location in the workplace.
- Because acceptable solutions often can be found, many asthma specialists recommend not quitting your job until all possibilities have been exhausted. If your asthma is very severe or cannot be controlled in the workplace, however, you may have to leave your job right away.

Once the diagnosis of asthma has been confirmed, you may be started on a regimen of medications. Asthma medications are of the following two types:

- Controller medications: These are for long-term control of persistent asthma. They help to keep airways open and reduce the inflammation in the lungs that underlies asthma attacks. You take these every day whether you are having symptoms or not.
- Rescue medications: These are for short-term control of asthma attacks. You take these only when you are having symptoms or are more likely to have an attack; for example, when you have an infection in your respiratory tract.

Your treatment plan will also include the following:

- Awareness of your trigger and avoiding the trigger as much as possible
- Recommendations for coping with asthma in your daily life
- Regular follow-up visits to your health care provider to monitor your condition, whether you are on medication or not

Together, you and your health care provider will develop an action plan for you in case of asthma attack. The action plan will include the following:

- How to use rescue medication
- What to do if the rescue medication does not work right away
- When to call the health care provider
- When to go directly to a hospital emergency department

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Your health care provider may want you to use a peak flow meter regularly, at least at first, to monitor how being at work affects your airway. The peak flow meter is a simple, inexpensive device that measures how forcefully you are able to exhale.

- This is a good way to help you and your health care provider assess the severity of your asthma.
- Ask your health care provider or an assistant to show you how to use the peak flow meter. He or she should watch you use it until you can do it correctly.
- Keep a record of the results. Over time, your health care provider may be able to use this record to improve your medications, reducing dose or side effects.
- Peak flow measures fall just before an asthma attack. If you use your peak flow meter regularly, you may be able to predict when you are going to have an attack.
- It can also be used to check your response to rescue medications.

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- When to Seek Medical Care
- Exams and Tests
- Next Steps
- Prevention
- Outlook


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