



REPORTING ON



Asthma

NEW YORK STATE HEALTH INSURANCE PROGRAM (NYSHIP) for Empire Plan enrollees and for their enrolled dependents, COBRA enrollees with their Empire Plan benefits and Young Adult enrollees

Understanding Asthma

Asthma is a chronic lung disease with four main features:

- Inflammation or swelling of the airways of the lungs.
- Narrowing of the airways due to tightening of the muscles that surround the airways.
- Extreme sensitivity of the airways to triggers causing the airways to close. Triggers are factors that set off or start your asthma.
- Increased secretion of mucus in the airways and difficulty breathing “out.”

Asthma causes inflammation in the airways of the lungs and, if left untreated, may eventually cause permanent damage and even death. This damage makes the tissues in the airways extremely vulnerable to further inflammation and could be considered the “vicious cycle” asthma sufferers experience.

Diagnosing asthma is the first step towards effective treatment. Studies show that up to half of all people who have asthma do not receive proper treatment because they don’t recognize the signs, and so they suffer needlessly.

Even though asthma can’t be cured, the risk of future attacks and damage to the lungs can be minimized with proper treatment.

If you’ve ever experienced an asthma attack, you know how frightening it can be. And since anything from strong perfume to cold temperatures can start an attack, living with asthma can be a daily challenge.

This report will help you better understand asthma, its symptoms and treatment and how The Empire Plan can help you control your asthma with a personalized program.

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This issue of *Reporting On* is for information purposes only. Please see your doctor for diagnosis and treatment. Read your *Empire Plan Certificate* and *Empire Plan Reports* for complete information about coverage.

CAUSES AND SYMPTOMS OF ASTHMA

The actual cause of asthma is not known. However, many studies have shown that specific factors can lead to the development of asthma:

- Having a mother and/or father with asthma
- Living in a large urban area, especially the inner city, which may increase exposure to air pollution
- Smoking and exposure to secondhand smoke
- Exposure to occupational triggers such as chemicals used in farming, hairdressing, and in paint, steel, plastics and electronics manufacturing
- Respiratory infections such as a cold, flu or bronchitis

- Low birth weight
- Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), a condition in which stomach acids back up into your esophagus
- Obesity

Triggers vary from person to person. Identifying problem triggers may help reduce exposure and prevent asthma episodes. See “How to Avoid Triggers and Allergens” on page 4 of this report to learn how to limit your exposure to these common triggers.

Based on information from the Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research

Symptoms of Asthma

- Wheezing
- Coughing, especially at night or after running or exercising
- Gasping or sighing
- Chest tightness, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Frequent respiratory infections, bronchitis or pneumonia

ASTHMA IS ON THE RISE

Asthma has become an epidemic – the number of cases has doubled in the past 20 years, according to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America. Several theories exist about why asthma rates have risen significantly during the last two decades, but there probably is no simple answer. While the reasons are not clear, the following factors may contribute to the rise:

- Spending more time indoors where exposure to indoor allergens such as dust and mold is greater
- Living in cleaner conditions than people did in the past, which makes our immune systems more sensitive to triggers
- Exposure to increased air pollution
- Increased physical inactivity or lack of exercise
- Dramatic rise in obesity may be linked to asthma as well as other health problems

Check Your Home

Researchers at Johns Hopkins University found an association between increasing levels of indoor pollution and the severity of asthma symptoms, especially for those who spend a lot of time indoors. Check your home for common sources of indoor air pollution from combustibles such as oil, gas, kerosene, coal and wood, as well as other substances such as asbestos, radon and carbon monoxide.

THE EMPIRE PLAN HOME CARE ADVOCACY PROGRAM

The Empire Plan Home Care Advocacy Program (HCAP) covers medically necessary durable medical equipment and supplies prescribed by your doctor. Durable medical equipment covered under HCAP is medical equipment that is for repeated use and is not disposable, such as a nebulizer, a device that reduces a liquid to a fine spray. For example, if your child needs a nebulizer for her asthma medication, call HCAP directly toll free at 1-877-7-NYSHIP (1-877-769-7447) for authorization

before receiving the nebulizer. Press 1 for the Medical Program, then 3 for HCAP. An HCAP representative will help you get the nebulizer quickly through an HCAP-approved provider and with paid-in-full benefits.

If you do not call HCAP for preauthorization or you use a non-network provider, you will pay a much higher share of the cost. For more information on HCAP, see your *General Information Book* and *Empire Plan Certificate and Reporting On HCAP*.

Ask Your Doctor

Updated National Asthma Guidelines note that treating other common health conditions such as sinusitis, sleep apnea and depression may help improve asthma control.

THE EMPIRE PLAN ASTHMA MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

The Empire Plan Asthma Management Program through the Medical Program provides guidance and support if you or your dependents are Empire Plan primary and have been diagnosed with asthma-related respiratory problems. Depending on the severity of your condition, UnitedHealthcare may telephone you or send a letter inviting you to participate in the program. Participation is voluntary, at no additional cost and confidential.

If you agree to participate in the program, you will receive informational material to help you understand your asthma.

If you are identified as high risk, in addition to informational material, an asthma nurse case manager will be assigned to answer your questions and help you better manage your asthma. The nurse may help to coordinate care with the doctor treating your asthma, as well as doctors treating any other health conditions that may exist.

To find out if you may be considered for the Asthma Management Program, please call The Empire Plan NurseLineSM toll free at 1-877-7-NYSHIP (1-877-769-7447) and press 5 on the main menu to speak with a nurse.

Asthma Action Plan

The National Asthma Education and Prevention Program (NAEPP) emphasizes the importance of a written, personalized Action Plan with specific actions you can take to control your asthma. The goal of an Asthma Action Plan is to reduce or prevent asthma attacks and emergency room visits through day-to-day management. Asthma Action Plans are unique, so ask your doctor to help you develop one specifically for you that includes information about the severity of your symptoms and daily medications.

CHILDREN AND ASTHMA

Asthma is a disease that strikes all age groups but the steepest increases in asthma cases have been among the young. An estimated 4 million children under age 18 have had an asthma attack in the past 12 months. Many others have “hidden” or undiagnosed asthma.

According to the American Lung Association, asthma is the number one reason for absences from school and emergency room visits due to chronic disease. This leads to lost work days for parents and emotional burdens that interfere with the everyday lives of children and families.

Asthma seems to run in certain families and is more common in children who also have allergies or eczema, a condition characterized

by redness, itching and oozing skin. It is also common in children who are exposed to secondhand smoke, air pollution, dust mites, mold and pets. If you have a strong family history of allergies or asthma, minimize your children’s exposure to these common triggers to prevent them from developing asthma.

If your child has been diagnosed with asthma, call The Empire Plan to enroll in the Asthma Management Program (see page 3). After enrolling, review your child’s asthma management plan with his or her doctor every three to six months. Don’t change or stop medications unless you are instructed to do so by the doctor, even if your child’s asthma seems to be under good control.

Do Children Outgrow Asthma?

Asthma is what is known as a chronic disease, which means that it usually doesn’t go away once you have it. However, children can still live full and active lives with asthma if they follow their asthma management plan and keep their asthma under control.

With good control, your child’s asthma should not limit his activities or slow him down. He should be able to participate in physical activities and sports and keep up with other children.

Based on information from the American Lung Association

HOW TO AVOID TRIGGERS AND ALLERGENS

Although asthma attacks seem sudden, they actually develop over a period of time. This provides a chance to prevent an attack by avoiding these common asthma **triggers**.

Triggers

Cigarette, cigar, pipe or secondhand smoke

Cold air or extreme weather

Exercise and physical activity

How to Avoid

If you smoke, quitting is the most important step to protect your lungs. Talk to your doctor about covered smoking cessation prescription drugs. If you live with smokers, ask them to smoke outside. If they want to quit, ask them to see their doctor. See page 8 for smoking cessation resources.

Bundle up on cold or windy days and cover your nose and mouth with a scarf. Stay inside with air conditioning during warm, humid weather.

Take your rescue inhaler medicines 20 minutes before exercising or exerting yourself, or as directed by your doctor.

Triggers

Emotional upsets, worrying or stress

How to Avoid

Use relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, counting, guided mental imagery, yoga, biofeedback and meditation. Avoid other people who are stressed.

Vapors, gases or fumes

Report these substances in the workplace and safeguard your home with testing kits or inspections.

Perfume and cleaning products

Leave the room. Avoid wearing perfume or being around others who wear perfume. Use unscented products. Use all-natural cleaning products such as vinegar.

Smog/air pollution

Minimize your driving as much as possible and stay indoors. Exercise and go outdoors in the morning hours or after 7 p.m. when ozone levels are low. Keep filters in air conditioners clean.

Aspirin such as acetaminophen

With your doctor's approval, take alternative pain relievers.

Sulfites

Always read ingredient labels carefully to avoid foods, beverages and other products with sulfites.

Colds and viruses

Practice thorough handwashing techniques or use a hand sanitizer. Avoid others with colds and viruses. Get a flu shot every year in autumn.

In many people, asthma appears to be an allergic reaction to substances commonly breathed in through the air. These substances are known as **allergens**. The following are substances that could cause an allergic reaction.

Allergens

Dust and dust mites

How to Avoid

Keep your home as clean and dust free as possible. Put mattresses and pillows in airtight covers with tape over the zippers. Replace your pillows at least once every five years. Wash all sheets and bedding in hot water (at least 130 degrees Fahrenheit) once a week.

Pollen

During allergy season, consider staying inside midday and afternoon, when pollen counts are high.

Molds

Close the windows and doors of your home to keep out airborne or outdoor molds. Fix leaky faucets and pipes to eliminate dampness, which causes mold. If you are not sensitive to it, use bleach to clean indoor surfaces. Use a dehumidifier. Keep filters in air conditioners clean.

Feathers

Buy quilts, pillows and cushions filled with man-made fibers. Also, consider replacing curtains with blinds, and carpets with wood floors.

Animal dander

Keep pets away from your bedroom and furniture covered with fabrics, carpets and stuffed toys.

Cockroach debris

Conduct a pest inspection in your home and treat for cockroaches if necessary. To avoid roaches, use traps and avoid leaving food out.

More than 20 million people in the United States suffer from asthma. Fortunately, there are many effective drugs available to treat this condition.

Most people with asthma need two kinds of medicine: one for long-term control and one for quick relief.

Long-term Control/ Preventive Medicines

Inhaled corticosteroids are considered the most effective medicines for long-term control over persistent asthma. They are inhaled by mouth into the lungs to control swelling and mucus production. It is important to remember that inhaled corticosteroids do not stop an asthma attack once it has started and do not immediately relieve asthma symptoms.

Anti-inflammatory drugs, also known as corticosteroids or steroids, when taken properly are a very effective treatment for asthma. These drugs are very different from the anabolic steroids that are misused by some athletes to build muscles.

Anti-inflammatories reduce swelling and mucus production in the airways. As a result, airways are less sensitive and less likely to react to triggers. However, much like inhaled corticosteroids, these drugs do not provide immediate relief.

Quick-Relief/Rescue Medicines

Bronchodilators relieve the symptoms of asthma by relaxing the muscle bands that tighten around the airways. This action rapidly opens the airways, letting more air in and out of the lungs and therefore improving breathing. Short-acting bronchodilators are used as quick-relief medications and are available as inhalations, liquids, injectables and pills.

Although not usually the first choice of rescue medicines for asthma symptoms, anticholinergics work by opening the larger airways and provide quick relief for those who cannot tolerate short-acting bronchodilators. Anticholinergics are available in inhaled form and can be used alone or combined with bronchodilators.

Your doctor will prescribe the drug that is best for you and your asthma symptoms. If you have side effects from any asthma drugs, be sure to contact your doctor for treatment and information.

Based on information from the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology

Your Prescription Drugs

A list of the most commonly prescribed generic and brand-name prescription drugs for asthma included on The Empire Plan Flexible Formulary Drug List is available on the New York State Department of Civil Service web site at <https://www.cs.ny.gov>. Select Benefit Programs, then NYSHIP Online and follow the prompts to the NYSHIP Online homepage.

The Empire Plan Flexible Formulary Drug List will help you determine the copay level for various asthma drugs. However, this list does not include all of the prescription drugs covered under The Empire Plan. **Note:** Medicare-primary enrollees and dependents, refer to The Empire Plan Medicare Rx drug lists at <https://www.cs.ny.gov/empireplanmedicarerx>.

For specific questions about your prescriptions, please call The Empire Plan Prescription Drug Program toll free at 1-877-7-NYSHIP (1-877-769-7447). Press 4 on the main menu.

If you already have asthma, there are steps you can take to improve your condition and make your life easier.

Your Diet

A good nutritional plan can help reduce airway inflammation. Evidence shows that antioxidants, salt and fatty acids may play a role in asthma. People with asthma should follow a low-salt diet with lots of fresh fruit and vegetables, and consume Omega-3 and Omega-6 fatty acids.

Omega-3 fatty acids are found in fish oils, butter and in mono-unsaturated oils such as canola oil. Omega-6 fatty acids are found in the polyunsaturated oils such as safflower and sunflower and margarines containing these oils.

According to the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, having fish twice a week or fish oil concentrate in the form of capsules are your best sources of Omega-3 fatty acids. Recent studies show that children who eat fish more than once a week are 30 to 70 percent less likely to have asthma than children who eat fish less often.

People with asthma are more likely to lack certain nutrients as a result of asthma drugs and the stress associated with the condition. Recent studies reveal that those with asthma are typically low in magnesium, folic acid and Vitamins B⁶ and B¹².

Nutrients that may help your asthma may be found in the following foods and supplements:

Magnesium	Whole grains, nuts, legumes and leafy green vegetables
Folic acid	Dried beans, peas, lentils, oranges, asparagus, beets, broccoli, spinach or prescribed supplements
Vitamins	Multivitamin supplements B ⁶ and B ¹²

Your Exercise Plan

Most experts agree that mild exercise can greatly benefit people with asthma. If you have asthma symptoms when exercising, there are some simple things you can do to reduce the chance that you will have an exercise-induced asthma attack.

First and foremost, you should avoid exercise if you have any indication of breathing difficulties before starting. Even the slightest wheeze can turn into an attack when you increase your exposure to any asthma trigger.

Before beginning your exercise routine, you should warm up your body and muscles. Try walking and other low-level aerobic activities, stretching exercises and running rapidly in place for 30 seconds, followed by a 60-second rest. Repeat this routine two or three times before starting your exercise program.

Exercise and Asthma

The National Athletic Trainers' Association recommends that people who have well-controlled asthma exercise to strengthen muscles, improve health and enhance overall well-being.

As always, you should try to reduce your exposure to other asthma and allergy triggers while exercising. Inhaled allergens, such as dust and dust mites, pollens, animal dander and air pollutants, are all known to aggravate exercise-induced asthma.

If you have inhaled allergies, you may find exercise more difficult in places where triggers are present. Try to exercise in places that have few triggers, or take a preventive dose of asthma medicine before beginning your exercise regimen.

When you finish exercising, do not stop suddenly. This could cause the temperature and humidity in your airways to change abruptly, possibly leading to an attack. Take at least a 10-minute cool-down period composed of light aerobics and stretching.

Once you are diagnosed with asthma, it is most important to take care of yourself by improving your diet and exercising regularly.

Based on information from the American Lung Association

SMOKING CESSATION BENEFITS

The U.S. Public Health Service has recommended medications and individual counseling as effective in helping smokers quit. Research shows that smokers are more likely to make a quit attempt and, most importantly, to succeed when they have easy access to smoking cessation treatments.

Through The Empire Plan Prescription Drug Program, you have access to prescription drugs that can help you to quit smoking.

Talk to your doctor about which prescription drug(s) would be appropriate for you. If Medicare is your primary insurance, individual smoking cessation counseling is covered through Medicare.

And if you have asthma and want to quit smoking, you can contact the New York Smokers' Quitline and the North American Quitline Consortium at the numbers listed below. Call today.

Based on information from Partnership for Prevention®

Help to Quit

For more information on smoking cessation, visit the customized Empire Plan Mental Health and Substance Abuse web site at www.liveandworkwell.com (use access code Empire on the homepage). You have access to educational and supportive articles, as well as resources to help you quit smoking.

RESOURCES

The Empire Plan Home Care Advocacy Program (HCAP)

1-877-7-NYSHIP (1-877-769-7447)
Press 1 on the main menu for the Medical Program. Then press 3 for HCAP.

The Empire Plan NurseLine_{SM}

Health information and support 24 hours a day, seven days a week
1-877-7-NYSHIP (1-877-769-7447)
Press 5 on the main menu.
Press 2 to reach the library, enter PIN 335, and then enter the four-digit topic code.

Allergy and Asthma Network Mothers of Asthmatics

1-800-878-4403
www.aanma.org

American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology

AAAAI Physician Referral and Information Line
1-800-822-2762
www.aaaai.org

American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology

1-847-427-1200
www.acaai.org

American Lung Association

1-800-LUNGUSA
(800-586-4872)
www.lung.org

Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America

1-800-7-ASTHMA
(800-727-8462)
www.aafa.org

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

1-800-CDC-INFO
(800-232-4636)
www.cdc.gov

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

www.niaid.nih.gov

National Institutes of Health

301-496-4000
www.nih.gov

New York State Smokers' Quitline

NY residents: 1-866-NY-QUITS
(866-697-8487)
for free assistance
www.nysmokefree.com

North American Quitline Consortium

Residents of other states:
800-QUIT-NOW (800-784-8669)
www.naquitline.net

New York State Department of Civil Service, Employee Benefits Division, Albany, New York 12239 • <https://www.cs.ny.gov>

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 This Reporting On was printed using recycled paper and environmentally sensitive inks.



AL1175

RO Asthma/October 2012