

Tips for Teens Managing Asthma

BY SHARLENE GEORGE

Testing the limits is what teens do best. That's why a simple asthma action plan is important for adolescents who want to take charge of their asthma management. Thomas F. Plaut, MD, author of *Asthma Guide for People of All Ages*, asks parents to try this approach when their teen with asthma wants more independence. They agree not to ask their son about his asthma symptoms when he's in the green and yellow zones of his peak flow charting. At any time, however, the parents can ask the teen to perform a peak flow measurement. If the score is in the low yellow zone, the parents can intervene.

This idea gives a teen the ability to make more decisions about his health, but it's balanced by parental supervision. The peak flow meter becomes an objective third party. Once the teen realizes monitoring his asthma on his own enables him to stay healthy and do any activities he wants, he won't feel like he's being nagged.

For a teen to develop this sense of autonomy, he first must understand the basics about peak flow monitoring, how his symptoms occur, how to avoid asthma triggers, and how to use preventive and rescue medications. Parents can explain these skills are a fundamental part of the teen making good decisions and actively participating in his self-care.

Some teens may need support and practice before parents are ready to take a step back and increase their young adults' responsibility.

Your healthcare provider or asthma educator can provide suggestions for teen-specific learning tools that can help build their asthma knowledge and tips for medication compliance. One suggestion is for adolescents to write their own text messages to remind them to take their medications like "Take ur meds dude."

Often teens think they can handle this added responsibility, but studies have shown most teens overestimate their ability to manage their asthma, and fewer than half of teens with asthma take their medication regularly. Teens may feel social pressure to fit in and resent that



asthma makes them different. So they may leave their inhaler behind when heading to the mall with friends.

They also may stop taking their daily controller medications because they don't feel an immediate effect as they do with a rescue inhaler.

Parents must be vigilant, but it's not always necessary for them to rush to take over management. They can help a teen who is using his meds on and off understand how and why he is making unhealthy choices. If he's embarrassed to take his medications in front of friends, agree that both of you will speak with a healthcare

provider about taking his daily controller medication at home.

As you begin to involve your teen in honest discussions, the open communication increases his commitment to his own care.

Teens also must know that outcomes of uncontrolled asthma can range from depression to increased symptoms that limit their activities to potentially fatal flare-ups. If they're serious about being independent, they must take these consequences just as seriously.

For instance, a teen shouldn't use his hectic schedule as an excuse if he forgets to carry his inhaler at all times. A parent can recognize why it's a challenge for him to remember, and then encourage him to work with his physician, school administrators, coaches and employers to ensure extra medication supplies are kept in his locker, school nurse's office, sports bag and after-school job. Extra copies of his asthma action plan should be in those places, too.

Ultimately, a teen who pays attention to his body and asthma triggers will be able to recognize early signs of a flare-up. Parents should give plenty of praise when they see their teen is taking steps to stay on top of his asthma care. A teen's biggest reward will be the self-reliance he feels when he realizes his actions avoided a trip to the emergency department.

Even when a teen is trying his best, severe asthma attacks can still occur. If a teen is feeling helpless about controlling his asthma, parents can understand his frustration and encourage him to speak with a healthcare provider who can reassess his asthma action plan. ■

Sharlene George is editor at *ADVANCE*.

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