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whole
health

Healing Asthma

by Linda Knittel

A holistic approach
not only soothes your
symptoms—it can
help repair your lungs



RAGWEED POLLEN

Ragweed is among the many environmental triggers for allergic asthma. Each plant produces about a billion pollen grains, which can travel up to 100 miles.

Asthma, and asthma treatments, are nothing new to humankind. Physicians in ancient Greece, who coined the term “asthma,” treated symptoms with diet changes and plant remedies. Chinese healers understood *xiao-chuan*, literally “wheezy breathing,” to be an imbalance of *qi* and prescribed acupuncture and herbs. Aztec people prayed to the rain god Tlaloc (also believed to rule asthma) for relief. In 21st century America, asthma sufferers take hits from inhalers and pop preventive pills.

Despite modern medicine’s life-saving treatments, the chronic lung condition persists. In fact, it’s been getting worse. “Asthma rates are skyrocketing due to increases in pollution, pesticides, and environmental allergens, as well as poor dietary choices,” explains Roberta Lee, M.D., medical director at The Continuum Center for Health and Healing at Beth Israel Medical Center in New York City. “Plus we’re getting better at recognizing the signs early on.”

Across the country, children as young as 2 are being diagnosed with

the illness. But asthma can develop at any age, with cases ranging from mild to debilitating. Asthma comes in two forms, allergic and nonallergic, and works like this: When you're exposed to a trigger, the muscles surrounding your airways constrict, and the walls lining these airways become inflamed and swollen. What results is usually wheezing, coughing, chest tightness, or shortness of breath. Untreated, severe cases of asthma can cause long-term loss of lung function, and attacks can be fatal.

While drugs can keep symptoms in check and stave off life-threatening attacks, current research reveals that they can come with a high price. "Used long term, some of these drugs can break down bones, suppress the immune system, and elevate blood sugar, setting one up for diabetes," says Lee.

Avoiding triggers and reducing inflammation with supplements and other holistic techniques can, over

time, decrease the risk of attacks and potentially reduce the need for pharmaceuticals, says Richard Firshein, D.O., author of *Reversing Asthma*. And unlike conventional medication, which treats symptoms, natural remedies can get to the root of the problem, says Firshein. "People can begin actually healing their asthma."

step 1 Tame Your Triggers

For someone with asthma, simple things like a trip down to a damp basement can set off a serious reaction. Common triggers for allergic asthma include household dust, mold, pet dander, and pollen; nonallergic asthma can be set off by factors like stress, air pollution, cigarette smoke, and even cold air. After a health practitioner has helped you pinpoint your personal triggers, begin your healing process by removing these offenders

from your life as much as possible.

To clean up your home environment, invest in a HEPA air purifier, vacuum and mop regularly, get rid of rugs, cover mattresses and pillows, wash bedding frequently in hot water, and keep pets out of bedrooms. In terms of the outdoor world, do what you can. Try to avoid breathing fumes, pollution, and smoke when possible, and steer clear of extreme cold temperatures, which can trigger an attack.

Food allergies can also contribute to symptoms in people with allergic asthma. Dairy, eggs, nuts, soy, and wheat are frequent offenders, as are dyes, preservatives, and other synthetic additives in many processed and fast foods. "The best place to start is with a basic platform of healthy eating, which is devoid of processed foods, refined sugar, and corn syrup and full of whole grains, lean protein sources, fruits, and vegetables," says Lee, who suggests

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going organic as often as possible. Though present in small amounts, "pesticides can be really irritating to the body and can create more work for its defenses." She also recommends cutting high-fat foods, limiting red meat, and adding lots of omega-3-rich fish like salmon to boost the body's anti-inflammatory processes.

While working to build this foundation of healthy eating, Lee suggests paying close attention to the relationship between certain foods and asthma symptoms. "A simple food journal of what you eat and how you feel can definitely shed light on which foods are triggering symptoms," she says. You can then remove suspicious foods one or two at a time for a month to see if symptoms subside. Once foods are added back in, it's usually obvious whether they are a trigger. "If things are still grey, there is an array of blood and skin testing that can be done to

pinpoint problem foods," says Lee. Dietary changes can be difficult, but remember, nothing tastes as good as breathing easily feels.

step 2

Try Natural Remedies

The body needs help buffering itself against the damage caused by conventional asthma medications, says Lee. "Natural treatments can provide this insurance." The following list of remedies can help relieve asthma symptoms, prevent attacks, and heal tissue. In most cases you can use them alongside conventional medications, but consult your physician before taking anything new or changing your medication. The doses below are for adults.

Magnesium is a natural bronchodilator and anti-inflammatory that fosters the transmission of information between cells, especially in the lungs. Oral supplementation can ease symptoms

over the long term. Firshein prefers magnesium aspartate at 500 mg per day. **Omega-3 fatty acids**, found in cold-water fish like salmon, flaxseed, and fish-oil supplements, help fight inflammation in the body. A common dose is 6 to 12 grams of fish oil a day or 3 tablespoons of freshly ground flaxseed. (Note: Asthmatics who are sensitive to aspirin may not benefit from fish oil.) **Vitamin C** is a powerful antioxidant that concentrates its effects in the lungs, particularly in areas damaged by pollution. It also works as a natural antihistamine. Firshein recommends 500–1,000 mg per day.

N-acetylcysteine (NAC) is an amino acid that serves as a free-radical scavenger while boosting the body's use of vitamin C. What's more, NAC is converted to glutathione, a powerful antioxidant that helps the liver process histamine and medications. Firshein recommends 500 mg twice a day.



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