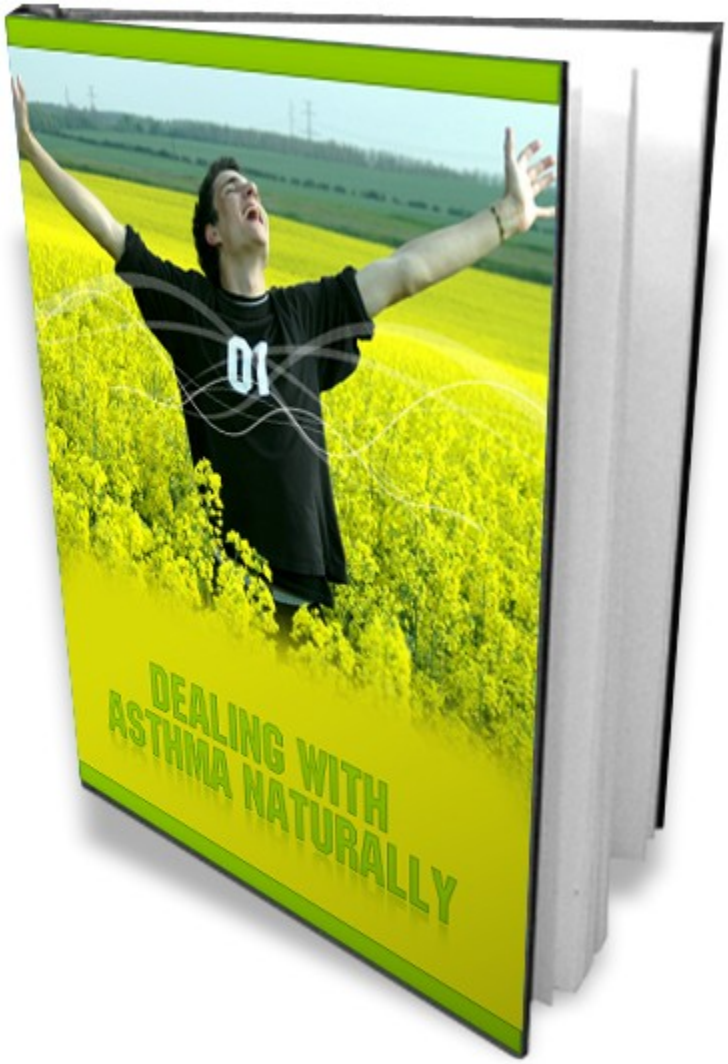
Dealing with asthma naturally



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Introduction

Have you or has anyone you know been diagnosed with asthma? If so, you may be a little confused by the questions that no one seems to be able to answer.

As you will discover as you read through this book, one of the reasons that asthma sufferers often find themselves left in the dark about their condition is that although the basic definition of asthma is very straightforward, almost everything else about the condition is not.

Consequently, in this book I'm going to answer as many asthma related questions as possible. Then, I will introduce a variety of natural treatments that have been shown to be effective to treat asthma.

Asthma might be simple to define, but...

The first question to address is "What is asthma?"

Fortunately, this is the easiest of all the asthma questions to be addressed, because the medical profession as a whole is in broad agreement as to how to define and classify asthma.

At its most basic, doctors agree that asthma is a respiratory disease that results in 'chronic inflammation of the airways'.

People often show symptoms well before asthma develops, because asthma can start with something as simple as a common cold or cough. Other symptoms that could potentially become asthma include sneezing, mild shortness of breath, or even something outside your lungs or respiratory tract such as a headache.

The bottom line is that it is extremely common for the initial signs of asthma to be ignored, because they appear to be nothing more than the symptoms of a common, everyday condition such as a cough or a cold. This lack of awareness is one of the main reasons many people do not seek treatment for their asthma.

According to the Asthma Society of Canada, as many as six out of every ten Canadians who have asthma do not control their condition. This figure is expected to be similar in other developed Western nations.

Because asthma is a chronic condition, it is one that has to be dealt with throughout your life. It causes inflammation, and therefore constricts the airways that carry air in your lungs. Consequently, this restricts the passage of air from the outside world through an asthma sufferer's lungs, making it difficult for them to breathe.

Asthma sufferers' airways are sensitive to many conditions, such as moist, warm or cold air, allergens, stress or physical exertion. The muscles that surround the airways react to these conditions by contracting and narrowing the airways of a person with asthma.

The problem is generally made worse by the fact that the muscles also cause excess mucus to be produced at the same time as the contraction, further blocking the airways.

However, many of the most common signs of an asthma attack can often be recognized well before the condition itself is fully developed.

Some of the signs of asthma are obvious, whereas others might not be as easily recognized and possibly the result of another medical condition. The less obvious the symptoms are, the earlier in the development cycle of asthma or the less likely that the symptoms will turn into asthma.

Less acute indicators that might fall into the 'early warning' category could include any of the following:

- Frequent mood changes
- Regular bouts of sneezing
- Restlessness
- Glassy or watery eyes
- Unexplained increased tiredness
- Dry mouth
- Persistent or constant headaches
- Sleeping difficulties
- Exercise intolerance
- Dark circles under the eyes
- Pale complexion

Obviously, all of these 'early warning' indicators could suggest that asthma might become a problem, but they could also be the result of another serious medical condition.

Consequently, you would not necessarily assume that any of the symptoms in the previous list is a clear indicator or precursor of asthma. However, if these symptoms are ignored, the condition is likely to worsen for anyone who is at risk to develop asthma.

When the condition worsens, the symptoms become increasingly obvious. These symptoms could include:

- Wheezing, coughing and general tightness in the chest
- Shortness of breath, especially after basic exercise such as walking or climbing the stairs
- Inability to talk
- Inability to think clearly
- Drooping posture or hunched shoulders indicating that the sufferer is struggling for breath
- Obvious nasal flaring as they struggle to inhale
- Contraction in the area below the ribs and in the neck while struggling to breathe
- A grey or grey-blue tint gradually appearing on the skin, often starting around the nose and mouth area

Any of these signs would be indicative of what we would normally recognize to be an ‘asthma attack’.

Everything about asthma up to this point seems relatively straightforward because you will probably recognize the asthma ‘symptoms’ - especially if you know someone who suffers from the condition. Asthma is a surprisingly common condition and one that most of us are familiar with to some degree.

Asthma is more complex than it might first appear...

There are many factors that make asthma an extremely complex problem as well as a simple one, factors which mean that there are probably no two people who have exactly the same 'level', 'degree' or 'type' of asthma.

While we do know that asthma will generally be seen first in young people, medical science is still unable to isolate exactly what causes asthma. What researchers have been to establish is that asthma can develop as a result of either environmental factors or it can be genetic, and of course, a combination of the two is also possible.

For instance, if one of your parents is an allergy or asthma sufferer themselves, then that increases the chances that you could become a sufferer as well. If both parents have the same problem, then your chances of developing asthma are significantly increased as well.

Additionally, there are plenty of recognized environmental factors or 'triggers' that can bring on an asthma attack, with these triggers generally being broken down into two different classifications.

The first group of asthma triggers would be those that cause an allergic inflammation of the airways, with the triggers in this group known as inflammatory triggers.

The second category is non-allergic triggers that do not cause the initial inflammation. However, they do have the ability to irritate the sufferer, making them itchy which in turn can bring on anxiety and stress that eventually leads to an asthma attack. These would be known as symptom triggers.

Known inflammatory triggers

Animals: Being in close proximity to many different types of animals, both domesticated and non-domesticated, can trigger an asthma attack.

All of the following animals have been recognized as having the ability to trigger an asthma attack:

- Cats, the most common cause
- Hamsters, gerbils and mice
- Dogs
- Rabbits
- And other 'furry' animals

It is often believed that such an attack is triggered by minute particles of dead skin from the animal being carried in the air. While this is partially true, there are many other substances that are produced by animals which can cause an asthma attack, such as saliva, bodily secretions and urine.

It is believed that up to 50% of children who suffer from asthma are most commonly going to have an attack brought on by close proximity to animals. Even many children who do not suffer severe asthma attacks are particularly sensitive to environments where they are surrounded by animals.

Of course, for many families, the beloved pet is a member of their family. But if you decide to keep a pet knowing that you are asthmatic or allergic to that pet, you are increasing your risk of suffering asthma attacks over time. If you or a member of the family suffers from asthma it is not recommended to keep furry pets in the home.

Dust mites: Dust mites are tiny insects that inhabit the same spaces as human beings to feed on the skin particles that humans shed millions of every day.

While you can find dust mites almost everywhere, even in the cleanest homes, they prefer warm, moist environments where there is plenty of food available. Hence, the most common places to find them would be in soft sheltered areas such as bedding, carpets, curtains, rugs, mats, cuddly toys and soft, cloth covered chairs and sofas.

Although it was generally believed up until recently that many dust mites and house bugs (such as the most common, the bed bug) had been eradicated in Western countries such as the USA and the UK, there has recently been a significant increase in the numbers of these insects living in our homes.

And whie they are generally harmless (although it is not particularly pleasant knowing that you share your life and home with them), they do shed body parts, which together with their droppings are known to cause the kind of allergic reactions that can trigger asthma attacks in certain people.

Molds: Molds are a type of fungus found in almost any dark, damp place. It is not molds per se that cause the kind of allergic reactions they can bring on an asthma attack, but when they reproduce, molds release spores into the air as part of the reproduction process and it is these spores that cause allergic reactions.

As suggested, molds are everywhere and can exist both inside and outside of the home. Consequently, almost everywhere or anywhere

you go you are exposed to mold spores, so you need to know what steps to take to reduce your susceptibility to these spores.

Pollen: Pollens are widely known to be general irritants and allergens, causing many recognized medical conditions such as hay fever.

Pollen is a substance that causes allergic reactions in many millions of people all over the world. Unfortunately however, it is completely impossible to avoid it altogether. Tree pollen is carried by warm, dry winds in the spring and grass and flower pollen is being transported everywhere by the hot dry wind in the summer.

Cockroaches: Cockroach droppings have been shown to trigger asthma symptoms. If you live in a place where cockroaches are a problem, the problem should be addressed sooner rather than later.

Viruses: Many different types of viruses are known to be responsible for triggering asthma attacks. They can also exacerbate the problem for anyone who is already an asthma sufferer.

Viruses that cause breathing difficulties, such as the rhinovirus and other viruses that result in the common cold or flu, are likely to be the ones that bring on an asthma attack or make the condition worse.

Air Pollutants: Poor air quality makes it more difficult for anyone to breathe and can cause a particular problem for anyone who is susceptible to asthma.

Industrial pollutants in the air we breathe will cause smog, whereas something localized like a heavily perfumed air freshener can be a serious problem for anyone who suffers from asthma. Both of these substances can trigger an allergic reaction and they also have the ability to irritate a pre-existing condition.

Asthma symptom triggers...

Smoking: It is widely recognized that cigarette smoke can provoke asthma symptoms or trigger an attack even in people who are not smokers themselves. Second-hand smoke, i.e. smoke that is being exhaled by smokers in close proximity to the person suffering from asthma, is known to cause asthma attacks.

Smoke is an irritant that attacks the internal lining of the respiratory tract, which will often trigger an attack in anyone who is prone to asthma.

It is also widely recognized that children who are exposed to second-hand smoke are likely to suffer far more asthma attacks and those attacks are likely to be far more severe.

If you or a family member is a smoker with people in the house who are already asthmatic or show signs of becoming asthmatic, it is recommended to stop smoking as quickly as possible.

Ignoring for a moment all of the other benefits of quitting smoking, if you smoke in an environment where there is an asthmatic child you are significantly worsening the child's asthma condition unnecessarily.

Medications: A significant proportion of people suffer allergic reactions to many widely used medicines such as aspirin, and these medicines can also cause an asthma attack.

Medicines such as beta blockers which cause contraction in the muscles that line the airways. This constriction reduces airflow through the lungs and can bring or worsen an asthma attack.

Food allergies: In addition, people who suffer allergic reactions to foodstuffs like dry fruit or nuts are likely to find that their allergy can trigger an asthma attack, with other common allergies that cause problems including gluten as well as a reaction to eggs or seafood.

Antibiotic use may encourage asthma: Nowadays, it is increasingly common for antibiotics to be prescribed to treat many different medical conditions, and this applies just as much to very young children as it does to adults.

However, research suggests that children who are subjected to a course of antibiotics within the first six months of their life are far more likely to develop allergies and asthma in later years than children who have not been given antibiotics. This is suggested on many well-respected websites like Science Daily and more recently at WebMD.

This connection is further highlighted by the Department of Social Security in the UK as well as by the Health Department in Australia. Hence, there seems to be a possibility that children who take antibiotics in the first six months of life are far more likely to develop asthma than those who do not.

Exercise: While exercise is generally something that is beneficial, it can cause problems for someone who suffers from asthma, particularly someone whose asthma is not well controlled.

Exercise causes problems because by definition, it increases your need to take in extra air to fuel your efforts. At the same time, as a part of exercise, it is natural for your muscles to contract, so it is entirely possible that your airways will also contract at a time when you need them to expand to be able to take on board more oxygen. Hence, exercise can be a problem for asthmatics.

In reality, you should view the problem the other way around. If exercise is causing you difficulties, it probably indicates that your asthma is not sufficiently controlled, meaning it is time to do something about it.

This is important because asthmatic or not, you do need to make regular exercise a part of your efforts to maintain general good health.

Cold air, pollutants and fumes: As previously mentioned, extremely cold air – the kind that makes a non-asthma sufferer gasp for breath themselves – is likely to cause asthma-like symptoms in anyone who suffers from the condition. Both extremely cold and hot air is outside the scope or parameters of most people's normal environment, so both extremes can cause breathing difficulties that might bring on an asthma attack.

In the previous section, I highlighted that pollutants such as smog can be both an inflammatory and a symptom trigger. Noxious chemical fumes are also symptom triggers of asthma.

While chemical fumes of this nature are unlikely to be a big problem for most people, there are certain places such as neighborhoods in close proximity to chemical manufacturing plants where fumes can be an asthma symptom trigger. Moreover, both fumes and pollutants can be a problem if they are present in your everyday work environment. If possible, you should make sure that you do not work in a place where chemicals are to be used as part of the normal everyday routine.

Beware of what you eat: Certain foodstuffs, especially those that contain chemicals such as monosodium glutamate, artificial colorings (especially tatrazine) and preservatives are believed to have the ability to trigger asthma attacks. In addition, it is also generally advisable to avoid foodstuffs that include yeast or mould such as blue cheese, bread, cakes and beer as it appears that these substances can also bring on an asthma attack in certain individuals.

Additionally, there is evidence to support the idea that asthma is worsened by the rich diet more common in industrialized Western countries versus less developed countries elsewhere in the world. Not only does the average Western diet contain far more processed and treated foods but Western diets also contain less natural nutrients.

Evidence for this comes from the fact that in many countries people only began to develop asthma when they began to include western foodstuffs in their diet to replace those that they had traditionally consumed. For example, until the country became oil-rich and started importing Western foods, asthma was almost unknown in Kuwait. The same phenomena also occurred in New Guinea.

In Africa too, a similar pattern can be observed. In fact, in a letter that was published in the leading medical journal The Lancet, two researchers Keely and Neil reported on the 'Asthma Paradox' (p.1099, 4/5/91) about children in Zimbabwe by stating "...we found the prevalence of reversible airways obstruction to be 5.8% in richer urban children, 3.1% in poorer urban children, and 0.1% in rural children." Reversible airway restriction is another medical term for asthma.

In Zimbabwe at the time, there was a vast difference between the diet consumed by urban and rural children, once again suggesting that there is a connection between a rich diet and the prevalence of asthma.

Emotions and stress: People who are prone to stress, anxiety or intense emotions may well find that the onset of any of these feelings or emotions could prompt an asthma attack.

There are many reasons why this could happen, such as the fact that when we stress, we tend to contract muscles. Contracting muscles in the chest could constrict airways and put additional pressure on our lungs resulting in an asthma attack.

If you are the kind of person who's prone to anxiety attacks, stress or emotional upset, understand that these can all make your asthma considerably worse and increase your risk of asthma attacks.

The list is long, but it could be longer…

As you can appreciate by now, the list of things that can induce asthma or bring on an attack is a fairly long one.

This list is by no means comprehensive, because each and every individual asthma sufferer is different. No doubt there will be some people who suffer from asthma that are reading this who are disappointed or exasperated because the #1 cause of their own asthma difficulties is not included on this list, but this only indicates the real nature of the problem.

While there are some causes listed such as smoking which seem to cause an asthmatic reaction in almost every sufferer, there are many other causes that could cause a very serious asthma attack in one person and have no effect whatsoever on the next person.

For example, I have mentioned a small handful of food allergies such as nuts and foods that contain yeast or mold. There are dozens or possibly hundreds of other similar allergies which can affect individuals and bring on asthma attacks in sensitive individuals but leave other people entirely unaffected.

This inability to establish exactly what causes asthma in different individuals can lead to other difficulties. For instance, according to the

results of some research, there are foodstuffs which are generally considered to be 'good' for you that might on the other hand contribute to the development of asthma in children.

One example was highlighted in a headline from the New Scientist magazine (19 July 2001): 'Margarine linked to dramatic asthma rise'. The article featured a report about the children in two Australian towns who consume large amounts of polyunsaturated margarine and lower amounts of food fried in vegetable oil. These children appeared to be twice as likely to develop asthma as children who ate less of these foods.

This could be taken to be confirmation that one of the essential fatty acids linoleic acid (Omega-6) could increase inflammation, but it contradicts the idea that polyunsaturated margarine is far better for you than butter.

As a fairly extreme example, the BBC reported on their website several years ago that researchers in Belgium were suggested that using indoor swimming pools was one of the reasons for the rise in asthma in children, owing to the use of chemicals to keep the water clean.

The take-home message is that while many substances, including foodstuffs and cleaning products, have been indicated to be a causative factor in the development of asthma, there is no such thing as a comprehensive list because every individual is different.

Can asthma be cured?

The simple answer to the question is, no. There is no known cure for asthma at the current time. The best way to treat the condition is to control it.

On the other hand, the good news is that for most asthma sufferers controlling their condition is a relatively straightforward matter. With control, asthma patients can live an almost completely normal life with only a relatively small risk of asthma attacks occurring.

For example, I have already suggested that once your asthma condition is under control regular exercise is no more difficult for an asthma sufferer then it would be for anyone else.

Of course, the next question is how you bring your asthma condition under control.

For most people who suffer from asthma, the first person to consult is likely to be their general practitioner or other medical professional. Based on your medical history, physical examination and asthma signs and symptoms your health care provider will recommend the best

course of action to control your asthma. Many asthma treatment plans include medication as a way to help control asthma.

As with any other medical condition, there are also risks involved in taking medications that are prescribed to treat with asthma. Moreover, because asthma is a chronic condition that cannot be cured, any drugs that you take in order to keep your asthma condition under control are likely to be drugs that you have to take for the rest of your life.

I shall therefore begin our study of how you control your asthma by considering the traditional pharmaceutical drug-based approach.

Treating asthma with drugs is a two-stage process

As with any medical condition, if you think that you or perhaps your child is showing signs of asthma, you should seek a professional medical diagnosis immediately. There is never any harm in seeking professional medical advice, as it is always far better to know exactly what the diagnosis is as opposed to guessing.

Once you have consulted your medical professional and have been diagnosed with asthma, it is likely that they will propose an asthma action plan that addresses the many issues involved in controlling your condition.

It is also likely that they will suggest a two stage method for treating your condition using pharmaceutical drugs. In general terms, this involves two different types of drugs, one which helps to control and prevent asthma over the longer term while the other is an emergency, quick relief solution for when an asthma attack strikes.

Over the years, depending upon the effectiveness of the long-term control program and the severity of your condition, it is likely that the specific drugs and treatments that will be recommended will vary according to the severity of your condition. Furthermore, when you go through specific periods in your life when the situation has changed such as pregnancy or the menopause, your medications will need to be modified to reflect these life changes.

Nevertheless, the general approach to controlling asthma with pharmaceutical drugs always remains the same, which is using a long-term drug to control the condition and having an emergency short term back-up to terminate an asthma attack when one occurs.

We will consider each of these in turn.

Long term asthma control drugs

What they are and how they work…

The most regularly prescribed medications for the long-term control of asthma are the corticosteroid drugs.

Corticosteroids are anti-inflammatory medications. The primary benefit of corticosteroids for asthma patients is they have the ability to minimize the risk of inflammation in an asthma sufferer's respiratory tract. Consequently, they reduce the likelihood of a swollen airway becoming irritated and bringing on an asthma attack.

Because the specific area of the body that is most important for an asthma sufferer is the respiratory tract, most medical professionals would recommend inhaled corticosteroids for patient suffering from asthma. This method ensures that the drugs are delivered to exactly the right part of the body.

Many asthma sufferers who are first introduced to the idea of inhaling corticosteroids every day for the rest of their lives would be somewhat alarmed by the connection that they might make between these drugs and anabolic steroids. However, the two drugs are completely different.

Nevertheless, as you will discover a little later in this section of the report, corticosteroids are similar to all medications in that they do have potential side effects and some of these side effects can be serious.

In some cases, especially if you suffer from severe asthma, your medical professional may recommend to take corticosteroids by mouth rather than by inhalation. Obviously, if you take the medications by mouth, more medication will get into your bloodstream and be delivered to other parts of your body. Thus taking corticosteroids by mouth means more medication is distributed throughout your body increasing the risk of unwanted side effects.

Other drugs that are sometimes recommended as agents for long term asthma control are as follows:

Long acting beta2-adrenergic agonists: These are drugs that help to open your airways that are generally taken in combination with inhaled corticosteroids as a way of controlling and preventing asthma symptoms in more severe cases. They should not be taken on their own.

Leukotriene modifiers: These are drugs that are generally not considered to be as effective as inhaled corticosteroids. Hence, they are normally prescribed for people who suffer mild to moderate asthma only. Their purpose is to prevent many of the physical reactions that are

a part of an asthma attack, such as the constricting of the airways and excess mucus.

Theophylline: This is another drug that works by relaxing the bronchial muscles so that it frees up the airways. It also has some recognized anti-inflammatory effects as well, which further enhances its ability to clear the respiratory tract, thereby making breathing easier.

The side effects of each…

As suggested above, most medical professionals prefer to prescribe inhaled corticosteroids, partially because this ensures that the drug goes to exactly the right part of the body, and partially because it also minimizes the amount of drug in the bloodstream and the resulting side effects.

However, while corticosteroids are the most commonly prescribed drug for asthma they do have recognized side-effects.

Corticosteroids can cause cataracts, clouding the lens in your eye so that your eyesight will gradually deteriorate. Remember that this is a long-term drug which you are going to be on for the rest of your life, so the chances of either cataracts or any of the other side-effects are likely to increase year after year.

Another acknowledged side-effect of corticosteroids is osteoporosis, a gradual weakening of the bones over the years. Weaker bones obviously make it far more likely that you will suffer bone breaks and dislocations in later life.

Furthermore, it is also suggested here that corticosteroids can lead to an even worse bone condition known as avascular necrosis. This is a condition where a lack of blood supply to bones in certain parts body can lead to those bones actually dying.

In addition, these same website suggests that long-term usage of corticosteroids is likely to lead to irreversible thinning of the skin, making it far more likely that you will suffer an increasing number of skin lacerations and injuries as you get older. Under this thinning skin, the blood capillaries will become even more exposed, making them far more prone to damage and injuries as well.

Other side-effects that have been noted with specific corticosteroid brands are a general puffing up and rounding of the face (’moon face’), weight gain, high blood pressure, ulcers in the stomach, headaches, general muscle weakness, a worsening of diabetes, acne, retardation of childhood growth and even psychiatric problems.

In 2005, the US Food and Drug Administration issued a warning that long-acting beta-2-adrenergic agonists had actually increased the number of fatal asthma attacks in clinical trials. Experts suspect that the reason for this was improper prescribing and use of these medications. Long-acting beta-2-adrenergic agonists continue to be used today in combination with cortiosteroids to prevent asthma attacks. Long-acting beta-2-adrenergic agonists should never be used during an acute attack. Short-acting beta-2-adrenergic agonists, such as albuterol, are used to treat acute asthma attacks and are discussed further in the 'quick fix asthma drugs' section below.

Because of their relatively mild nature, Leukotriene modifiers have not as yet indicated any serious adverse side-effects.

Although it used to be considered one of the first choices to treat asthma, theophylline is no longer routinely prescribed due to the risk of side serious side effects, monitoring and interactions. Adverse effects of theophylline include vomiting, stomach pain, diarrhea, headaches, abnormal heart rhythms, seizures and others listed at the top of this Wikipedia page. Unlike other asthma drugs theophylline requires frequent blood monitoring. Theophylline also has many drug-drug and drug-food interactions that other medications effective at controlling asthma do not.

Where natural treatments begin to fit into the picture

One of the reasons that the long-term drugs that are most commonly prescribed for dealing with asthma have so many potentially unpleasant side-effects is the cumulative nature of taking the drugs every day. Consequently, it should be no surprise that the potentially adverse side-effects are far greater from these longer-term drugs than they are from the quick fix emergency drugs that you will read of in the next chapter.

Hence, all of the natural treatments that will be recommended later are primarily targeted at replacing as many of the long-term drugs that you have to take to deal with your asthma problem.

At the same time, in the worst case scenario, asthma is an extremely dangerous illness, one that can actually kill you. It is therefore probably unwise to try to treat every aspect of your asthma problem with entirely natural treatments, because in the event of a sudden, severe asthma attack, such treatments are unlikely to be the most appropriate.

For this reason, although I would recommend that you try as many of the natural treatments for asthma which will read of later as possible, I would not necessarily recommend that you throw away the 'quick fix' emergency treatment that you will read of in the next section.

Firstly, because you use this ‘quick fix’ only in emergencies, it is to be hoped that your use of it is extremely infrequent, and therefore the adverse side-effects are likely to be minimal to non-existent. Secondly, you might need to use it to save your life, and there can be no better reason than that.

‘Quick fix’ asthma drugs

The idea of the short acting drug is that you need to have something that you can keep to hand which you can use in the emergency event of a severe asthma flare-up.

Most people who suffer from asthma are therefore likely to carry an nebulizer or inhaler which uses a short acting beta2-adrenergic agonist drug that relaxes the muscles of the chest and airways very quickly. In this way, the worst effects of an asthma attack can be offset within a matter of seconds, making breathing easier and relaxing the sufferer as a direct result.

As suggested in the last chapter, long acting beta2-adrenergic agonist drugs do have suspected side-effects, but these side-effects are clearly going to be considerably less noticeable in a short acting drug that you only inhale infrequently in times of emergency.

For this reason, whilst I would recommend that you should attempt to replace long acting beta2-adrenergic agonist drugs (and other long term drugs) with natural treatments, I would not necessarily suggest that it is appropriate or indeed safe to do so with the short term drugs that are used only in the case of emergency.

Defining well controlled asthma

Using a peak flow meter

If you're trying to control a long-term asthma problem, you need to have some way of knowing when you have that problem under control. For this reason, you need to have a way of measuring your condition.

The most effective tool for self-assessing how well controlled your asthma is will be a peak flow meter, a device that you can use at home to measure your maximum rate of expiration of air or your peak expiratory flow rate.

Such a device is effective for people who suffer from asthma because by measuring the amount of air that you are breathing out, it can give you a clear indication of how efficiently you are breathing. As the efficiency of your expiration is directly related to how well your asthma is being controlled, such a simple device is all you really need to ascertain your current control levels.

When using such a peak flow meter, the first thing that you need to do is establish a benchmark figure.

Over several days and if at all possible at a time when you are feeling full of energy and totally relaxed, take a meter measurement. Take an average of these measurements over the course of several days and use it as your normal or usual peak flow reading. You could of course take the reading only once but this risks completely skewing the accuracy of your results, so an average collected over several days is far more useful.

With this benchmark established, you should then take a regular measurement to compare your peak flow in certain conditions and at different times of the day with your baseline standard measurement.

Use the following scale as an assessment of your current state of asthma control:

Reading	Description	
Green Zone	80 to 100 percent of the usual or normal peak flow readings are clear.	A peak flow reading in the green zone indicates that the asthma is under good control.
Yellow Zone	50 to 80 percent of the usual or normal peak flow readings	Indicates caution. It may mean respiratory airways are narrowing and additional medication may be required.
Red Zone	Less than 50 percent of the usual or normal peak flow readings	Indicates a medical emergency. Severe airway narrowing may be occurring and immediate action needs to be taken. This would usually involve contacting a doctor or hospital.

As mentioned earlier, if your asthma is properly controlled, you should be able to do most things that you would normally do, including reasonably rigorous exercise.

However, every time you do so, make sure that you take a meter reading relatively soon after completing your exercise program because taking a measurement only when you are relaxed and at rest will ultimately prove very little. After all, if your asthma is under control, you surely want to undertake normal day-to-day activities, so you're not going to be doing nothing but sitting around all day.

If your asthma is well under control, you should be able to do 99.9% of what non-asthma sufferers can do, so testing in as many different conditions or situations is important.

Spirometry

Spirometry is a more detailed way of measuring pretty much the same things that using a peak flow meter at home will measure, namely the airflow in and out of your lungs and their effectiveness.

During this test which will usually be carried out by your doctor or a medical technician, it is most common to have to take a deep breath, clamp your mouth around the breathing tube on the machine (called a spirometer) before exhaling as much air as you can.

Other tests that are sometimes performed involve the patient inhaling and exhaling as quickly and as powerfully as possible and in all cases, it is common to wear a nose-clip to ensure that you are only breathing out through your mouth.

Spirometry differs from using a peak flow meter in that it records your entire forced breathing capacity when measured against time, whereas a peak flow meter will usually record the largest breathing flow that you can sustain for ten milliseconds.

A spirometer measures your breathing capacity in two different ways, focusing on:

- Forced expiratory volume (FEV1): This measures the volume of air that you exhale in the first second of a forced exhalation.
- Forced vital capacity (FVC): Measures the maximum volume of air that can be exhaled both quickly and forcibly.

For an asthma sufferer, it is most common that the measurement applied to your breathing ability is going to be based on the FEV1 reading. The following figures represent a good indication of where you would stand if you fell below 80% (of the norm for your height, weight, age and gender) which would be considered the lowest figure for a person with no breathing difficulties:

- FEV1 of between 60% and 79% of the normal figure would indicate a mild breathing blockage.

- FEV1 of between 40% and 59% of the normal figure indicates a moderate breathing obstruction.
- FEV1 of less than 40% is indicative of a serious or severe obstruction which probably needs attention fairly quickly.

Other asthma control factors to consider

As should be evident by now, having your asthma under control is more related to the long-term nature of your problem than it is to the short lived asthma attacks that you might suffer from time to time.

However, it should be equally evident that the more frequently you suffer these attacks, the more likely it is that your asthma is not as well-controlled as you perhaps thought it was.

As a general rule, if you do not suffer more than one or two asthma attacks a week, you could assume that your asthma is under control.

Taken together, good peak flow figures, relatively infrequent asthma attacks and the ability to do almost everything you want to do would indicate someone who has their asthma well under control.

However, knowing what you already know about the potentially horrible side effects of some of the drugs that are commonly used to control asthma on a long-term basis, I would assume that you would not necessarily want to achieve this level of control using these drugs.

It is therefore time to start considering the natural alternatives.

Changing your lifestyle might be the first thing to consider

We have already examined many factors that can trigger asthma ranging from genetic influences about which you can do very little about to everyday lifestyle factors such as smoking and eating the wrong foodstuffs which you can certainly do a great deal about.

Thus, the first factor to consider is, what changes can you make to your life and lifestyle that will reduce the asthma risk in your life?

In order to this, you need to go back to the earlier 'triggers' chapters to look through the list of factors that might induce asthma or an asthma attack. In each case, you need to ask yourself, is it likely that you could have a problem and if so, can you address that problem?

There are some changes that you can no doubt make almost immediately. For example, if you eat nuts, dried fruit and bread as part of your every day diet, you could try cutting them out to see if it makes any difference. If it is going to make a difference, it should be something that you would see within a few days or weeks, either by using your peak flow meter to register an improvement in your breathing quality or because the frequency of asthma attacks falls away.

Do you read the labels on all the food that you eat? If not, then you will have little or no idea of whether you are eating MSG, tatrazine or any of the hundreds of different preservatives that are commonly used in every day foodstuffs. Start reading the labels now and begin to cut out foods that carry chemicals that could be a contributory factor to your asthma.

If you have half a dozen furry animals running around the house, you should know that they are exacerbating your asthma problem. Thus, you have a choice of living with the problem or asking someone else to look after your menagerie.

If you smoke, quit now. If another member of your family smokes, make them understand how sick it is making you in an effort to get them to stop.

Even if you have the cleanest imaginable house, the chances are that you still have millions of bugs and mites and you may even have cockroaches. Contact the local pest control people as soon as possible to get their assistance in getting rid of these unwelcome visitors.

At the same time, consider buying new bedding, mattresses and pillows because getting rid of the old stuff is one of the quickest ways of cutting the population of unwelcome 'guests' by millions in one fell swoop.

Keep an eye on the pollen count in spring and summer and try to avoid going out any more than necessary when the figures are at their highest.

If you work in a job where you are subjected to chemical fumes or some other form of pollution, is it realistic to consider changing your work? If so, you should do so, because it is obvious that your condition is never going to improve as long as you're working in a polluted environment.

Are you a person who suffers from anxiety attacks or stress? If so, you might want to consider taking up something like meditation or yoga as a way of learning to control your more extreme emotions. This in turn will reduce the likelihood that you will suffer recurring asthma attacks caused by stress or anxiety.

If you are taking medication of some description for another medical condition, are those medicines aggravating your asthma problem? If so, you should probably consult your medical attendant to see whether they can change your medication to reduce the difficulties that the current medication is causing you.

If you have asthma or suffer asthma attacks, the lifestyle that you currently lead probably plays a significant role in ensuring that you cannot get rid of your problem.

Hence, making the necessary changes is going to be a significant step in the right direction, so you should start to make these changes as quickly as possible.

Even if every small change make only makes the tiniest contribution to your efforts to reduce your susceptibility to asthma attacks, the combined effect of all of these changes taken together will be significant.

Common natural asthma treatments

There are lots of natural solutions that you can apply to reduce the severity of your asthma problem, but before going any further, there is one thing to remember.

Every asthma sufferer is different and it therefore follows that what is effective for one person in curbing the severity (or even getting rid of) their asthma might be completely ineffectual for someone else. In short, whilst everything that will be presented from this point on has been shown to work for some people, not everything is likely to work for you.

It is therefore to a large extent a question of trial and error. Try as many of the proposed solutions or ideas as possible, run with each of them for a few days or a week and at the end of that time, re-assess your condition and situation to establish how successful you have been.

However, if you follow a trial and error program, you should do so by sampling only one idea, suggestion or substance at a time.

It is only by testing in this way that you can establish exactly what it is that is working for you, whereas if you try combining three or four suggestions together at the same time, you will have far less idea which that selection is the one that is beneficial.

Multivitamins

Whilst we probably all know that if we at a perfectly balanced diet, we will get all of the vitamins, minerals and other nutrients we need, for many of us in the helter-skelter of everyday life, it is a truly difficult to eat such a perfect diet.

Consequently, if you suspect that your daily diet is in any way unbalanced or somehow deficient so it does not provide the perfect balance of vitamins and minerals you need for consistent good health, you should consider taking a multivitamin every day.

If you do so, it is generally believed that the vitamins that are most effective in keeping asthma at bay are B6 and B12, which is best combined with folic acid for maximum asthma fighting effect. On the other hand, you should avoid taking on board too much vitamin C. and magnesium, as well as excess amounts of fish-based products which may well contain Omega-6 which was highlighted earlier as a potential cause of asthma.

Honey

Honey is believed to be effective for reducing the incidence of asthma attacks, particularly when it is combined with a natural antioxidant such as cinnamon powder or turmeric extract.

If you prefer to take honey on its own, then one teaspoonful every day is enough to provide relief from the worst effects of asthma.

If on the other hand you want to maximize the effectiveness of this particular natural treatment, then your first option is to consume the teaspoon of honey with half a teaspoonful of cinnamon powder either first thing in the morning or last thing at night.

Alternatively, you can heat a teaspoon of honey so that it is really warm before mixing it with a quarter teaspoonful of turmeric powder, before consuming this potion twice every day.

One other thing that you might try is to hold a jar of honey under the nose of someone who is suffering an asthma attack. In some cases, this can help to ease the sufferer's breathing by freeing up their airways whilst also making it easier for them to pull in a greater volume of air.

However, in this last situation, I would still nevertheless make sure that you have their emergency nebulizer to hand, just in case this particular method doesn't work in an emergency situation.

Garlic

Garlic can help alleviate most of the symptoms of asthma and asthma attacks, because the active ingredients that give garlic its natural pungent aroma are also powerful natural inflammatory substances that help to reduce the tendency to suffer inflammation that is a characteristic of asthma.

In order to use garlic most effectively (and least offensively), boil 10 cloves of garlic in half a pint of water for 5 to 10 minutes before drinking the liquid. Whilst boiling the garlic in this way will remove a good degree of the natural pungency of the vegetable, it will still nevertheless linger on your breath, so I would recommend that you drink this last thing before you go to bed if you do not want to destroy your social life completely!

Alternatively, try making a brew of ginger tea before adding two cloves of garlic to your cup. This combines two of the most powerful natural anti-inflammatory substances known to man in one drink, so by quaffing a cup of garlic infused ginger tea first thing in the morning and last thing at night, you should once again be able to reduce the worst effects of asthma.

Apple cider vinegar

Apple cider vinegar is another substance that is believed to have anti-inflammatory qualities, so you can either take a teaspoonful (it can be very bitter or sour) before every meal, or you can drop two tablespoonfuls into a glass of warm water before drinking one every day.

Eliminate dairy produce

Many asthma sufferers find that cutting down or removing dairy produce from their diet altogether provides a significant boost to their efforts to reduce the worst effects of asthma. There are many different reasons why this might be the case.

In the example of cheese, you are looking at a dairy product that has been fermented, and therefore many cheese products are very rich in yeast, which can be very bad for someone who suffers from asthma.

Milk-based products encourage the production of mucus – if you drink full fat milk, you can almost feel it happening as you drink – and the last thing that any asthma sufferer needs is a foodstuff that does this, because they already have enough problems with their own natural abilities to produce more mucus than they need.

If you take yoghurt, even totally fat-free natural 'live' yoghurt, you are taking on board bacteria that might irritate your body or prompt an adverse reaction.

Basically, for many asthma sufferers, cutting out dairy products is something that helps them. It is therefore something that you should consider if you have not already done so.

Eliminate wheat (gluten) based products

Removing wheat-based products from your diet should also provide your breathing ability with a significant boost. Cakes, biscuits and commercially baked white flour bread should all be removed from your diet if at all possible.

Drink black coffee

Whilst it might seem a little counterintuitive to drink a caffeine rich beverage like black coffee, it is in fact the caffeine in the drink that makes it so valuable fighting asthma. Caffeine is a powerful anti-inflammatory agent and therefore drinking black coffee can provide a significant boost to your system's ability to withstand the worst inflammatory characteristics associated with asthma attacks.

Take cold showers

This one perhaps sounds a little 'off the wall' (i.e. crazy), but the fact is that taking core showers strengthens your immune system and

promotes better blood flow, both of which will enable you to fight against asthma far more effectively.

Just taking one single cold shower everyday can make a massive difference to your ability to resist the worst effects or ravages of asthma, so this is definitely something that is worth trying because devotees suggest that the positive results are almost instant!

Herbs for fighting asthma

In addition to ginger tea with its powerful anti-inflammatory characteristics, it is often suggested that drinking more relaxing herbal teas such as chamomile or mint tea can provide a significant boost in your efforts to defeat asthma naturally.

Most devotees of herbal teas suggest that both chamomile and mint have the ability not only to relax anyone who takes them on a regular basis, but they also have anti-allergenic qualities as well.

If you're trying to deal with asthma, both these teas are well worth trying because they can help to reduce the levels of stress and anxiety in your everyday existence whilst also minimizing the possibilities of the kind of allergic reactions that will often trigger an asthma attack.

It is also suggested that both of these herbs soothe your lymph nodes too, which should again help to reduce the chances of suffering an asthma attack.

Other herbs that are believed to have anti-asthma characteristics are sage and lemon balm, both of which are believed to have significant healing powers.

Many other herbs are widely believed to have powerful antioxidant effects which are once again very helpful in dealing with conditions where inflammation is an accepted problem such as asthma.

And whilst asthma itself is not a contagious disease, we have already seen that viruses can play an active role in causing asthma attacks. Consequently, the fact that many of the following herbs also have antiviral and antibacterial properties makes them even more valuable to an asthma sufferer:

Rosemary: Rosemary stimulates your immune system, enhances circulation and improves your digestion. It also contains exactly the kind of anti-inflammatory compounds that you need to fight asthma. Add this to the fact that it contains polyphenols which are widely recognized to be amongst the most effective natural antiviral and antimicrobial compounds, and you can see that rosemary is a very powerful herb indeed which can play a vital role in your fight against asthma.

Oregano: It is believed that the antioxidant abilities of the natural chemicals in oregano are up to 20 times more powerful than those of any other herb. It also has strong microbial characteristics as well as being a rich source of many of the vitamins that you need in a balanced diet. Add this to the fact that it contains omega-3 fatty acids and you have another herb that you should include in your daily diet (it's great on pizzas and pasta in particular).

Dill: Dill is yet another herb with acknowledged antioxidant qualities that also provides a significant source of calcium, thereby protecting against bone loss. It is also a rich source of trace minerals such as manganese, magnesium and iron, all of which you need as part of a healthy diet that you must consume in your natural battle against asthma.

Tarragon: Tarragon is a member of the dandelion and daisy family, a herb that is once again extremely rich in antioxidants as well as antibacterial and anti-inflammatory agents. Furthermore, it helps to strengthen your immune system and to protect your liver at the same time.

Motherwort: Motherwort is a herb that is highly effective for opening up the airways completely naturally, as well as having the ability to relax anyone who takes it so that stress and anxiety which can aggravate asthma are both lessened.

All of the herbs listed above can help in your fight against asthma. However, herbs by themselves are not a magic bullet that will get rid of your problem overnight.

On the other hand, by increasing the amount of herbs you take as part of your everyday diet whilst following the other dietary guidelines in this report, you will be doing a great deal to boost your body's ability to combat asthma.

A natural asthma diet plan

In addition to many of the foodstuffs mentioned earlier and the herbs mentioned in the last section, one of the most effective ways of combating asthma is to make sure that your body is as strong and as healthy as possible. In order to do this, you need to eat a diet for health and strength.

Thus, you should base your diet on the following guidelines:

- Eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables, ideally raw, but steamed if they have to be cooked;
- Go easy on the red meats, and cut out dairy products as previously mentioned;

- Keep an eye on your fat consumption, because a low-fat diet is by far more preferable than one that is high in fats;
- Include garlic, onion and ginger but resist the temptation to cook the life out of them, because when you do, you also cook out the goodness;
- Wheat grass juice is great for getting rid of toxins and reducing the amount of mucus in the body;
- Try to fast one day a week where you eat only raw fruit and vegetables. If you can do so, it will significantly reduce both the toxins and mucus in your body, thereby reducing the chances of asthma attacks.

Specific foods that you should include in your diet as frequently as possible include bananas, grapes, oranges, bitter gourds and spinach in addition to everything previously mentioned.

All of these foodstuffs provide a great source of vitamins and nutrients with various different qualities that would help an asthmatic control their condition by keeping the lungs lubricated, increasing amino acids which are anti-allergic for asthmatics and so on.

Less common natural asthma treatments

Halotherapy or speleotherapy

Have you ever enjoyed that wonderful feeling when you're standing next to the ocean, clearing your nostrils with the salt laden air of the sea?

If you have, then you probably already appreciate that inhaling salt enriched air is a very effective way of improving your breathing in exactly the way you would want to do if your breathing is impeded by asthma.

You might therefore want to consider the idea of getting a salt inhaler, a device with which you can inhale air that passes over see or mountain crystal salt.

Obviously, the device works on exactly the same principle as does the ancient 'folk' remedy of clearing the worst effects of cold or flu by inhaling the fumes from hot salt water, which is a variation of a remedy that has been used since ancient times. Indeed, salt therapy was recommended by Hippocrates, who is generally considered to be the father of modern medicine over 2000 years ago, so it can hardly be said to be a new idea.

Nevertheless, there does seem to be significant evidence that using salt therapy in this way could be something that could prove to be a big help in your efforts to minimize the worst effects of asthma in a totally natural and non-invasive way.

Marine phytoplankton

In recent times, some scientists have established that marine phytoplankton may be sufficient on its own to counteract the worst effects of asthma.

Because phytoplankton is widely considered to be the source of all life on Earth – according to NASA, it produces 90% of the oxygen we breathe – and because phytoplankton have been populating the oceans for over 300 million years, it's perhaps not surprising that the environment in which phytoplankton live is a stunningly close match for the makeup of human cells.

Consequently, scientists are now working on the theory that phytoplankton could offer a solution to many of the most intractable medical problems mankind has ever had to deal with, perhaps being able to provide a complete natural cure for a wide range of conditions that includes asthma.

The suggestion is that a teaspoon of phytoplankton material every day could be enough to cure existing diseases and ward off future medical catastrophes.

The only problem is, phytoplankton is relatively difficult to extract from its surrounding environment – perhaps not too surprising when you consider that plankton are almost invisible even under the most powerful microscope – so *if you can find* phytoplankton to buy, it is likely to be prohibitively expensive. Nevertheless, with the very real prospect that we might be able to 'farm' phytoplankton in the reasonably near future, there is a genuine possibility that a totally natural 'cure' for asthma is not all that far away.

Adopting a homeopathic approach to treating asthma

When any adult or child suffers an asthma attack, we have already established that they will usually be treated with a nebulizer which gives them a quick 'blast' of inhaled drug. Any such attack comes on because something has triggered it so the homoeopathic approach to asthma is that this trigger is not only part of the illness, but also part of the cure.

The homoeopathic approach aims to tap into the body's own ability to heal itself by making the trigger part of the remedy, on the basis that stopping the symptoms is not enough. Asthma homoeopathy takes the view that in order to treat asthma correctly, you must treat the sufferers whole body at the same time, as you cannot isolate one single cause from the whole.

At the same time, even homoeopathic practitioners who specialize in treating asthma understand that there is no one treatment that works very well for everyone because every individual asthma case is different.

The homoeopathic way of treating any individual medical condition is to treat that condition as if it is a symptom of something that is wrong with the whole organism, rather than being the problem in itself. And there seems little doubt that for certain individuals, adopting the homoeopathic approach to asthma will work. There are for example reports that using homoeopathy to deal with asthma has resulted in some individuals developing enhanced immune systems that has enabled them to fight against the disease completely naturally without any further external assistance.

Unfortunately, there is a relative shortage of high-quality information about homoeopathic treatment for asthma on the net, so if this is a method of dealing with your problem that you would like to consider, try searching for a local homoeopath with whom you can discuss your problem and any solutions that they might be able to offer.

Conclusion

Asthma is a terrible problem that is suffered by many millions of people all over the world, although there does seem to be a higher prevalence of asthmatics in developed countries where the diet is richer than there are in less developed countries.

Nevertheless, for asthma sufferers all over the world, it is a condition that is at best debilitating and scary, whilst at worst, it can be fatal.

As suggested, if you suspect that you have asthma problem, you need to visit a suitably qualified medical professional to seek diagnostic confirmation. Thereafter, you have choices to make, but in all honesty, I would suggest that there really are no choices to be made in reality.

We have already established that many of the drugs that are prescribed for long-term control of asthma can have some very unpleasant side-effects indeed, whereas as with the vast majority of natural treatments, there are no evil side-effects.

Given that every asthma sufferer reacts to treatments in different ways and the fact that many of these natural methods of handling asthma have been proven to work, it has to make sense to try to deal with your asthma condition naturally before turning to pharmaceutical drugs.

What you do for short term treatment of your condition will depend upon how serious your asthma attacks are, because if they are serious enough, you may still need to use a nebulizer.

Nevertheless, over the long term, adopting a natural approach to dealing with your asthma problem has got to be the sensible way of going about things.