

Living with Asthma

The Story of My Search

“Well, Matt, it looks like you have asthma,” the doctor told me. What a shock it was to hear those words. I thought I just had a stubborn cold. As I listened to the doctor explain my condition, questions started going through my head: Wasn’t I too old to get asthma now? How could I stay on the basketball team? What about my camping trips?

I already knew that asthma is a chronic, or long-lasting, disease which affects the lungs and that certain medications help control the number and severity of asthma episodes (that’s when the coughing and wheezing start). I did not know much more than that, though.

Since I am on the basketball team and also go on weekend camping trips with my Boy Scout troop, I wanted to find out more about the kinds of things that might trigger an asthma episode. Were there trees and plants I should avoid? Would I be able to keep up with my teammates on the basketball court? Would I still be able to get the dog my parents had finally agreed to let me have?

I made a list of all of the things I wanted to learn. From that list, I was able to form my research question: *Can I effectively manage my asthma?* Later, I was able to form an answer: I can manage my asthma and live a

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full, active life by following my doctor's instructions about medications, by avoiding pets, by sticking to an exercise program, and by minimizing the effects of environmental factors that can trigger asthma episodes.

My search took about three weeks, and it was a new experience for me. I started by doing an online search using the keywords *asthma* and *managing*. I was surprised at the amount of information I found. There were Web sites maintained by doctors, pharmaceutical companies, and support groups. I ordered some free print materials from one of the pharmaceutical companies; unfortunately, I had my first draft finished before they arrived. However, because it turned out to be good information, I went back and reworked part of the draft.

The next thing I did was to call my allergy/asthma specialist, Dr. Anders. I forgot to take her busy schedule into account, and I did not know that she had planned a short vacation during the time I was doing my research. She graciously agreed to meet with me after her office hours one day. I am glad she did, because she gave me some very good advice. She also let me borrow a few videos about asthma.

During that same week I went to my school library. The librarian showed me the reference books and regular books. I went through the latest volumes of the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* and found several

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magazine articles. By the end of the week, my head was swimming with a huge amount of information.

My original search question remained the same: *Can I manage my asthma?* However, I was able to define exactly what it was that I wanted to manage. I ended up narrowing my topic to four areas I had to deal with in order to manage my asthma: medications, pets, sports exercise, and environmental factors.

The Results of My Search

The first thing I found out was that certain substances can trigger an asthma attack of “coughing, wheezing, and shortness of breath” (Abramowicz). Allergens constitute the largest category of triggers. According to Susan Berg, “Allergens are substances that produce an allergic reaction in people who are sensitive to them.” Common allergens are pollens from plants, animal dander, dust mites, and mold and mildew (23). My doctor said she would test me for allergies right away. If I am allergic to certain things, allergy shots help by desensitizing me to them and make them less likely to trigger an episode (Anders).

If I find that I am allergic to certain pollens, I can reduce the chances of an asthma episode by staying indoors when those pollens are in the air.

Indoors, I can reduce the risk of an episode by using the air conditioner to circulate air while keeping windows and doors closed to keep pollens out. Cleaning the air with an air cleaning device can reduce dust mites, mold spores, and other indoor allergens (“85% of Americans”).

Several medications and devices help people with asthma. One device is called a peak flow meter. This is a tube about six inches long; its purpose is to measure your ability to push air out of your lungs. When you blow into it, you can find out if your lungs are working at their capacity. If they are not, you know it is time to take some medication (“Peak Flow Meters”). My doctor explained how the different medications work: an inhaler sends medication right into the lungs without a lot of side effects (Anders). She showed me another type of inhaler to use when my peak flow number is low, or if I get short of breath while I am exercising. This inhaler helps me get my breath back right away.

I also found out that certain anti-inflammatory drugs are used to keep air passages open and prevent asthma episodes. One type of these is called corticosteroids. I was glad to find that these are not the same kind of steroids that cause serious side effects in athletes who take them. The risk of side effects with corticosteroids is very small (“Asthma Medicines”).

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Physical exercise makes an asthmatic's condition worse, or so doctors believed twenty or thirty years ago. At that time doctors believed a quiet, restful life was best. Now new research is showing that "people with breathing disorders who can maintain a regular program of exercise and activity are able to experience maximum cardiovascular fitness along with greater symptom control, or an increased ability to exercise and do the activities of daily living. Exercise trains the respiratory muscles to work more efficiently" (Smolley and Bruce 127–128). I had been worried that I would have to drop off the basketball team and miss the next Boy Scout campout we had planned. These facts, however, make me confident that I can continue to play basketball and go on camping trips.

Nancy Hogshead, a former Olympic athlete, demonstrates some exercises for asthmatics on a video called *Aerobics for Asthmatics*. I tried some of the exercises, and they are great. Nancy is quite a role model. She and other Olympic athletes (including Rob Muzzio, Jim Ryun, Jackie Joyner-Kersey, and Amy Van Dyken) have had to deal with asthma, and many of these athletes still compete (Smolley and Bruce 128).

In fact, a recent study of Olympic athletes





revealed that “more than 20 percent of the American athletes who participated in the 1996 Summer Olympic games may have had asthma” (“Olympians”). I am very encouraged by this fact.

After doing the research, I concluded that if I developed a plan for myself, I would be able to

manage my asthma.

This is my working plan:

1. Medical Treatment: Take allergy shots if it turns out I have allergies. Take my medications and monitor peak flow levels every day. Call the doctor as necessary. Go in for checkups every three months.
2. Environment: Give up going on hikes if the pollen count is very high. Avoid other allergens whenever possible.
3. Pets: Postpone a decision on pets until I find out whether I am allergic to them.
4. Sports/Exercise: Continue with all sports and activities. Use the peak flow meter before and after basketball games. Do warm-up breathing exercises. Keep an inhalator handy for emergency use.

Reflections on My Search

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Doing the research took a lot more time than I thought it would. I have learned how to plan my time more efficiently and how to organize my thoughts better. I am getting better at organizing my paperwork, too. Since I am rather shy, it was good for me to be forced to ask the doctor and librarian for assistance. My writing skills also improved. Now I am able to write a paragraph and stick to one topic. I also learned how to evaluate sources of information I find on the World Wide Web. In addition to these academic benefits, I got a lot of information that will help me lead a full and active life—in spite of my asthma.

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