

Kathy Przywara

ASTHMA



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I have asthma. I mainly have allergic asthma, but I also get flares with upper respiratory infections. It is cough-variant asthma, which means I cough instead of wheeze. This makes it harder to tell the start of a flare since my peak flow readings don't drop.

I was diagnosed as an adult. The first time I was given a prescription for a rescue inhaler was after returning from a trip to Alaska with severe bronchitis. There was no mention of asthma. It was typical for me to get at least one bout of bronchitis each year.

I continued to have bronchitis regularly for several more years. I wasn't told I had asthma until I was pregnant. My asthma was worse with my second pregnancy. That was the first time I was started on a preventative inhaler. I really didn't want to be on medications while pregnant, but the doctor assured me that breathing was important for the baby. My asthma has continued to get worse and become more persistent, as have my nasal allergies, which are my biggest trigger.

I likely had undiagnosed asthma as a child. I remember having difficulties in gym class when running. I would also cough until I was gagging every spring during fitness testing. I was always coughing as a kid, but allergy testing came back negative, so the doctor dismissed my symptoms. Asthma definitely affects my daily life, I have to be careful with pets and avoid triggers like pollen. Often I feel like I'm holding others back.

Both of my children have asthma. My son has mostly outgrown his asthma, but it has transformed into chronic sinus issues. My daughter has allergic and exercise-induced asthma. It's painful as a parent to watch her struggle during sports. But with proper management, pretreatment and persistence, she was able to become a second degree black belt. I remember one time she was sparring and having asthma issues. She kept coughing, which meant she couldn't focus, and her sparring partner landed a punch and I remember thinking, "she just got sucker-punched by asthma."

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Asthma is a chronic disease that swells the airways, or breathing tubes, of your lungs. This swelling (inflammation) causes the airways to make thick, sticky secretions called mucus, and it causes the muscles in and around your airways to get very tight or constrict, which makes it very hard for you to get air into and out of your lungs.

Asthma can be caused by genetics, allergies, respiratory infections, and irritants such as:

- Molds and dust
- Exhaust fumes from vehicles
- Chemicals in garden sprays
- Strong odors from paint, perfumes, colognes, hair spray, deodorants, and cleaning products
- Tobacco smoke
- Weather changes
- Stress or exercise
- Medications
- Sulfites in foods such as dried fruits, wine, and beer

Learn more: ATS Patient Information Series. "What is Asthma?" New York, NY: American Thoracic Society, 2013. thoracic.org/patientsg