VA/DOD CLINICAL PRACTICE GUIDELINE FOR THE PRIMARY CARE MANAGEMENT OF ASTHMA

Department of Veterans Affairs
Department of Defense

Patient Summary

QUALIFYING STATEMENTS

The Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense guidelines use the best and most recent information that is available at the time they are published. Guidelines provide information that providers, healthcare team members and patients can use to provide better care for individuals with asthma. They do not define a standard of care and you should not use them in this way.

This Clinical Practice Guideline is based on a complete and organized review of both clinical studies and studies about how diseases affect the health and illness of groups of people. A panel of experts from a number of clinical fields developed this Guideline. The Guideline clearly explains how different care options relate to health outcomes. To do this, the experts rated both the quality of the clinical studies and the strength of the recommendations.

It is normal for providers to vary in how they plan to treat patients with asthma because they take into account the needs of each patient, the available resources, and the limits that are unique to their healthcare setting or type of practice. Healthcare professionals should assess how well these Guidelines apply to each patient, and their clinical setting or situation. Patients can use the information in this Guideline to understand the different ways that asthma can be treated.

These guidelines do not represent Department of Veterans Affairs or TRICARE policy. The Guideline recommendations for specific tests and/or treatments do not guarantee coverage of the patient's care by civilian providers or healthcare facilities. You can find more information on current TRICARE benefits at www.tricare.mil or by contacting your regional TRICARE Managed Care Support Contractor.

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I. What is asthma?

Asthma is a lifelong illness of the airways in which the muscles tighten, and the airways become swollen. This causes wheezing, chest tightness, coughing, and shortness of breath. Asthma affects your airways and ability to breathe. Asthma can be different in different people. This can be due to several factors including the environment and inherited conditions.

Asthma is not a minor condition. It should be taken very seriously. In the United States, nearly 10 people every day die from asthma and asthma-related complications. Therefore, it is important that you work with your healthcare providers to ensure your asthma is managed appropriately.

II. What are the possible triggers of asthma?

Asthma symptoms or attacks can be brought on by several factors that are called triggers. These include allergies, exercise, weather, emotions, and lifestyle choices such as smoking.

Triggers of asthma may include:

- Dust mites
- Cold air
- Air pollution
- Fumes and smoke from any source (tobacco, cannabis and/or vape, etc.)
- Pets
- Pollen
- Exercise or physical exertion
- Food allergies
- Viral infections
- Strong emotion/stress

Asthma can also be a result of an underlying condition. Your healthcare provider can help determine whether your asthma is a result of an underlying condition. It is best to discuss triggers and asthma management with your health care provider.

III. How is asthma diagnosed?

Usually, providers can diagnose asthma without using laboratory tests. Often, your provider will talk with you about your medical history. They may also do a physical exam. Additional tests, such as lung function or chest x-ray, may be needed.

IV. What is an asthma action plan?

An asthma action plan is a personalized plan of care created by you and your provider to better control your asthma. The asthma action plan describes what medicine should be taken, daily treatment, and safety protocols. This type of care plan aims to better control your asthma; identify signs and symptoms of worsened asthma; and how you can respond if you experience a loss of asthma control. It helps to create a solid basis of care.

V. Goals for asthma treatment

You should work with your healthcare provider to set goals that you can reach. In general, your goals should focus more on what you can do to help lessen the effect of your asthma and improve your quality of life. Goals for asthma treatment may include:

- Improve ability to participate in exercise and other activities
- Improve your quality of life
- Improve your ability to manage your asthma and have a healthy lifestyle
- Gain understanding of the nature of your type of asthma, what triggers it, and how to avoid or reduce triggers
- Address other health issues that can result from asthma (for example: poor sleep, weight, anxiety, etc.)

VI. Treatment options for asthma

The different treatments of asthma include a combination of self-care, long-term control medications, and quick relief medications. You can discuss treatment approaches with your provider to decide what is best for you.

a. Self-care/self-management

The treatment of asthma begins with ways you can help manage your own asthma and ways you can reduce the effects the asthma has on other parts of your life. This is called self-care or self-management. Self-care includes taking care of yourself in ways other than taking medications, having medical tests, or using other medical treatments.

Self-management refers to everything you can do on your own to manage your health problems and live your life as fully as possible. You may have to make many decisions every day about exercising, taking medications, and dealing with life issues, such as managing stress or stopping smoking or vaping. Most importantly, you should become active in your own asthma self-management efforts.

b. Long-term asthma control medications

Long-term medications are controller medicines that help prevent and reduce swelling inside the airways. Because they need time to work to prevent attacks, they must be taken every day to be effective, even when you are feeling fine. Examples of this type of medication include:

- Inhaled corticosteroids, which are medicines that you breathe in, such as:
  - Beclomethasone (QVAR REDIHALER)
  - Budesonide (*PULMICORT FLEXHALER*)
  - Ciclesonide (*ALVESCO*)
  - Fluticasone (*FLOVENT HFA*)
  - Mometasone (*ASMANEX HFA*)
- Inhaled corticosteroids combined with long-acting beta agonists such as:
  - Budesonide/formoterol (*SYMBICORT HFA*)
  - Fluticasone/salmeterol (*ADVAIR HFA* and *DPI*)
  - Fluticasone/vilanterol (*BREO ELLIPTA DPI*)

- Mometasone/formoterol (*DULERA HFA*)

Talk to your provider to learn more about the medicine you are taking.

Studies show that, for patients with asthma, taking inhaled corticosteroids every day (and not just when asthma is bothering them) reduces the risk of having to go to the hospital or other serious problems. Discuss with your provider if you should take inhaled corticosteroids every day. If so, put a plan in place, such as reminders, to make sure you do not forget to take the medication every day. There are other medications that your provider may prescribe to control your asthma.

c. Quick relief medications

Quick relief medications relax the airway muscles, allowing oxygen to reach the lungs. This makes symptoms less severe. These medications can be used to treat sudden breathing symptoms at home or an asthma attack in an emergency scenario. However, they should NOT be used as routine treatment, as they do not help prevent asthma attacks.

Examples of this type of medication include:

- Short-acting beta agonists
  - Albuterol (PROAIR HFA, VENTOLIN HFA, PROVENTIL HFA)
  - Levalbuterol (XOPENEX HFA)
- Oral and intravenous corticosteroids: used to treat severe asthma attacks
  - Prednisone

d. Treatment of exercise-induced asthma

Exercise-induced asthma is often triggered by intense physical activity. The most common symptoms of exercise-induced asthma include coughing, tightening of the chest, wheezing, and shortness of breath starting 5-20 minutes after the start of physical activity. Your provider may prescribe medication to use before physical activity or exercise.

VII. Why can’t I get my asthma under control?

If you are having trouble controlling your asthma, it may be due to one of the following reasons:

- Smoking/vaping or breathing secondhand smoke
- Being around allergy triggers (for example: pets, pollen, pollution)
- Taking medication incorrectly
- Living in an environment where there are dust mites or mold (such as in carpets, drapes, comforters, or stuffed animals)
- Having another condition (such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, heart disease, reflux, seasonal allergies, or sinus disease)

VIII. Questions to ask your care team

Ask about anything that seems unclear to you. Some examples may include:

- What are the causes of my asthma?
- How will asthma affect daily activities?

- Is it safe to exercise with asthma?
- How will asthma affect my, or my family's, military status? (military or military family members)
- What can make my asthma symptoms worse?
- How can I tell if my asthma is getting worse, and what do I do if my asthma gets worse?
- How will my child's asthma be handled at school?
- What types of tests are available to monitor my asthma?
- What type of medicine am I taking?
- When is it safe to take less asthma medicine or lower the dose?
- Are there other treatments I can use with my asthma medicine?
- Which medicine should I take every day, and which should I take only when my asthma is bothering me?
- Am I taking my medicine the correct way? (Take your inhaler with you when you see your provider or pharmacist and show him or her how you use it.)
- Should I see an asthma specialist or a multidisciplinary team?
- Should I get the flu, pneumococcus, or other vaccines?
- Could my symptoms be due to something other than asthma (such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, heart disease, or a chronic lung infection)?

IX. You can find more information on asthma here:

- National Health, Lung, and Blood Institute: https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health-topics/asthma
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: https://www.cdc.gov/asthma/
- American Lung Association: https://www.lung.org/lung-health-and-diseases/lung-disease-lookup/asthma/