

# Monitoring Your Asthma with a Peak Flow Meter

A peak flow meter is a small, easy-to-use instrument that measures your peak expiratory flow – a number that tells you how fast you can blow out air after a maximum inhalation. It reveals how well your lungs are working.

Sometimes peak flow numbers will decrease hours, or even a day or two, before other asthma symptoms become evident. When you monitor peak flow numbers on a daily (or regular) basis, you can identify this drop and take steps to prevent an asthma episode. The peak flow numbers, along with watching for asthma symptoms, can be used to make decisions about asthma treatment.

You and your doctor may find it easier to develop an asthma management plan for you if you check peak flows on a routine basis. Also, it is important to talk with your doctor about the steps you should take when your peak flow number drops.

**Establishing a Personal Best** The highest number regularly blown is your personal best. This is done by recording the peak flow values for two weeks first thing in the morning before taking any medications and late afternoon when your asthma is under control.

Once you know your personal best, it may be helpful for you and your doctor to use peak flow numbers for your treatment “zones.” Zones will help you decide what to do when you have changes with your asthma.

**Checking Your Peak Flow** The peak flow should be checked once a day (morning or evening) if the numbers do not change much from time to time. When you are doing well you can use the peak flow meter two times

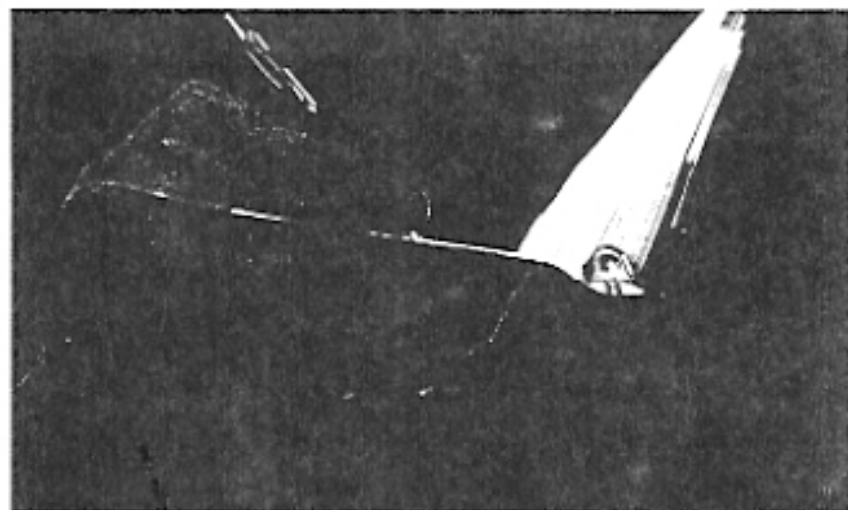
during the week and once on the weekend. It is best to check your peak flow number more often when you:

- ✓ Begin to wake at night with asthma symptoms.
- ✓ Are having more daytime asthma symptoms.
- ✓ Have a respiratory infection (a cold).
- ✓ Need to use “rescue medicine.”

This is medicine prescribed by your doctor to be used for quick relief of asthma symptoms. If you can, check your peak flow before taking the rescue medicine. Then check it again 20 to 30 minutes later.

**Talking to Your Doctor** Take your peak flow meter and Asthma Health Diary with you each time you visit with your doctor or nurse. If you have an Asthma Action Plan from your doctor, follow the Plan for each peak flow zone.

• If your peak flow is less than 80 percent of your personal best, take your rescue medication. Wait 20 to 30 minutes and check your peak flow again. If your peak flow is not back above 80 percent, report this to your doctor. If your peak flow is back above 80 percent, recheck your peak



Write your peak flow numbers on a peak flow sheet or in an Asthma Health Diary.

**Keeping Track of Your Peak Flow Numbers** Write your peak flow numbers on a peak flow sheet or in an Asthma Health Diary. Be sure to write down any peak flows that are different from your usual daily readings. Record the date, time, and peak flow numbers. Also note any changes in how you feel or changes in your medicines. List anything you think may be making your asthma worse.

flow about every four hours for a day or so. Call your doctor if you continue to need rescue medicine.

If your peak flow is less than 60 percent, consider this an emergency. Take your rescue medicine, and call your doctor or go to the emergency room right away. Your peak flow meter is only an aide to you. Do not rely on your peak flow numbers alone when deciding whether to take your rescue medicine or call your doctor. Your symptoms also need to be considered.

## Signs That Your Asthma Is Getting Worse

In addition to measuring your peak flow on a daily basis, you need to look out for early warning signs of an asthma attack. Early warning signs of an asthma attack include:

- ✓ Runny, stuffy nose;
- ✓ Fatigue;
- ✓ Chin or throat itches;

- ✓ Headache;
- ✓ Moodiness;
- ✓ Cough with activity or laughing;
- ✓ Wheezing with activity;
- ✓ Waking up at night or early morning with a cough or wheeze;
- ✓ Faster breathing rate; and
- ✓ Irritability.

**Action!** Keep track of your peak flow numbers with the National Jewish MyAsthma Diary, a free interactive online resource for tracking important information on the impact of asthma on your life. Visit [www.nationaljewish.org](http://www.nationaljewish.org) for more information. ■

Source: National Jewish Medical and Research Center