

Living with asthma

Olympic track star Jackie Joyner-Kersey has it. So does gold-medal diver Greg Louganis.

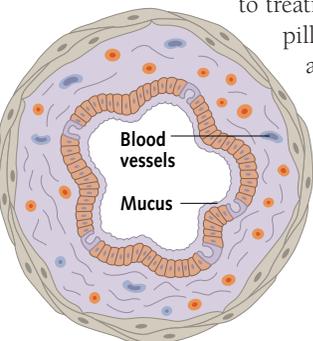
Millions of Americans have asthma, a serious lung disease, but these world-class athletes have demonstrated by their successes that asthma doesn't have to stop you from enjoying a full and productive life.

There are a lot of unknowns about asthma, such as what exactly causes it, and why some people have it and others don't. Asthma cannot be cured, but asthma symptoms can be controlled. You can prevent symptoms from happening or keep symptoms from getting worse once they occur by

regularly taking your prescribed medications and closely following your prescribed management plan.

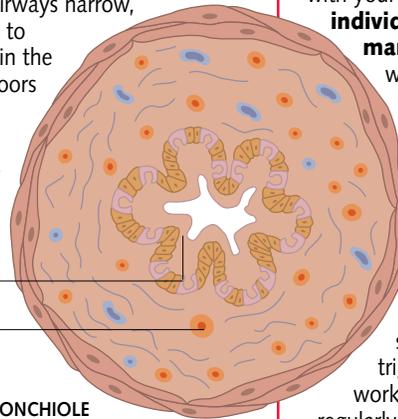
A study in the June 9, 1999, issue of JAMA explored whether adding an inhaled **corticosteroid** (anti-inflammatory medications that prevent and reduce swelling inside the airways) to treatment with corticosteroid pills would prevent relapses after an acute asthma attack better than corticosteroid pills alone. The researchers believe additional studies are needed to determine the best drug treatment after an acute asthma attack.

HEALTHY BRONCHIOLE



WHAT IS ASTHMA?

Asthma is a chronic disease in which the lining of the airways in the lungs (**bronchi** and **bronchioles**) become inflamed and swollen and produce extra mucus. Episodes of asthma (known as **attacks**) occur when the airways narrow, making it difficult to breathe. Factors in the environment (indoors and outdoors), called **triggers**, can make asthma symptoms worse.



OBSTRUCTED BRONCHIOLE

SYMPTOMS:

You may have all of these symptoms, some of them, or just one. Asthma symptoms are recurrent and can be mild or severe.

- Wheezing (a whistling or hissing sound as you breathe)
- Shortness of breath
- Feelings of tightness in the chest (like someone is squeezing your chest)
- Coughing

TRIGGERS OF ASTHMA:

Some of the most common triggers that can make asthma symptoms worse include the following:

- Allergens, such as pollen, mold, animal **dander** (fine scales from the skin, hair, or feathers of pets and other animals), dust mites, or cockroaches
- Viral infections of the respiratory tract
- Irritants, such as strong odors or sprays, chemicals, air pollutants, or changing weather conditions
- Tobacco smoke or wood smoke
- Exercise

TREATMENT AND PREVENTION:

The factors that cause asthma symptoms can be different for each person with asthma. It is best to work with your doctor to come up with an **individualized asthma management** plan that tells you

what medications to take and when to take them.

Following your prescribed management plan at all times is important to prevent or reverse asthma symptoms. It may take some time working with your doctor to figure out what triggers your asthma symptoms, how to avoid the triggers, and what medications work best for you. See your doctor regularly to check your asthma and review your treatment.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- National Asthma Education and Prevention Program
National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute Information Center
P.O. Box 30105
Bethesda, MD 20824-0105 or www.nhlbi.nih.gov
- American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology
800/822-2762 or www.aaaai.org
- American Medical Association
AMA Health Insight
www.ama-assn.org/insight/spec_con/asthma/asthma.htm

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm.

Additional Sources: American Medical Association Health Insight (www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm), American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

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