

Donna Matlach, D. Min.

ASTHMA



I often say my severe asthma is like a firecracker. Once the fuse has been lit, will it explode? Or will it fizzle out? You can never predict how an asthma exacerbation will end. My childhood asthma returned with a “bang” after an episode of bronchitis in 2007. Despite the usual treatments for asthma, it continued to the point where I was home-bound with a nebulizer and other medications for two years.

My husband and I traveled to different hospitals and specialists around the country looking for answers. Finally, I was diagnosed with “complex eosinophilic asthma with autoimmune features.” I received a trial drug and was finally able to have a somewhat “normal” life again. During this time I learned to be my own advocate. I also realized the stigma I felt from asthmatic episodes in public, use of medications around others, as well as the psychological stress that this disease had inflicted on me and my family.

Learning to control my symptoms and living with the risk of experiencing a debilitating flare-ups are intricate parts of my journey with severe asthma. Speaking at conferences and medical events is all part of my mission to educate not only the public but the medical

Donna Matlach, D.Min. was a patient speaker at the ATS 2018 International Conference in San Diego, California.

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community about severe asthma and the profound effect it has on all involved. I am now on the board of a global organization that is doing this type of education for children, adults, athletes, and the medical world.

My story can be summarized with a few key messages: Keep track of your asthma’s frequency, severity, and its effect on you and your family, (physically, emotionally, and financially by journaling), and TALK to your medical professional about your disease. CREATE an asthma action plan, for both you and your family, for quick reactions when exacerbations do occur. UTILIZE your medications properly and in the manner prescribed even when you feel well.

Through my journey, I refuse to let asthma define who I am, rather I define asthma as a part of my life I WILL control. ■

Asthma

Asthma is a chronic disease that affects the airways of a person’s lungs and causes airways to become swollen. This swelling (inflammation) causes the airways to make thick, sticky secretions called mucus. Asthma also causes the muscles in and around airways to get very tight or constrict. The swelling, mucus, and tight muscles can make airways narrower than normal make it difficult to breathe. Frequent lung or sinus infections can cause asthma. Irritants that can also cause asthma include:

- Exhaust fumes from cars, buses, trucks etc.
- Chemicals, such as garden sprays.
- Molds and dust.
- Strong odors from paint, perfumes, colognes, hair spray, deodorants, and cleaning products.
- Tobacco smoke from cigarettes, pipes, or cigars.
- Temperature or weather changes.
- Stress or exercise.
- Medications, including aspirin and betablockers (heart or blood pressure medicine).
- Sulfites in foods such as dried fruits, wine and beer.

Learn more: ATS Patient Education Series. “What is Asthma?” New York, NY. www.thoracic.org/patients/patient-resources/resources/asthma.pdf.