

Peak Flow Monitoring

FACT SHEET prepared by the Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ

A peak flow meter is a small plastic device with a measuring gauge on the side. It measures the speed with which you can blow air out of your lungs. The speed is dependent on how open your airways are. When you are well, the airways are open and your peak flow value is high. If your asthma is playing up and your airways are tight, your peak flow value will drop.

Your doctor will give you a peak flow meter to keep FREE of charge.

Why should I use a peak flow meter?

A peak flow meter will tell you how well your lungs are functioning. However, it is not a stand-alone tool and should be used in conjunction with the following symptom assessment:

- Are you sleeping through the night and not waking with asthma symptoms?
- Are you using your reliever inhaler more than three times a week?
- Is asthma stopping you doing your usual activities?
- Who should use a peak flow meter?
- A peak flow meter is useful in asthma management and not recommended in COPD management

Reliable readings are not usually obtained in very young children (under 6 years). Children should first master the use of their inhaler (inhalation) before using a peak flow meter (exhalation)

What are the benefits of using a peak flow meter?

- It helps you to identify asthma symptoms and triggers
- You can find out if your asthma treatment is having the effect that it should
- Your peak flow diary is a record that you can show your doctor at your next visit especially if you are not as well as usual

When used with your Self-Management Plan it means that you are in control of your asthma

How do I use a peak flow meter?

- Sit upright or stand up
- Slide the marker to the mouthpiece end – as far as it will go
- Hold the meter level. Keep your fingers from obstructing the marker
- Take a deep breath
- Put the meter in your mouth; close your lips around the mouthpiece making a good seal. Keep your tongue away from the mouthpiece
- Blow the air out of your lungs as hard and fast as you can, with a strong huff
- Note your reading from the marker level
- Repeat these steps twice more and record the best reading
- If you find that your first blow is always the best, then you only need to blow once

Ask your doctor, nurse or asthma educator to check that you are using your meter correctly

When should I use a peak flow meter?

Initially, you should take readings before using your inhalers every morning and again in the evening for two weeks. Your doctor can then see if your values are as high as they should be. You may choose to either make a graph or keep a diary of these readings and how you feel.

If your values are high, your doctor may tell you to reduce your medication. It is important to keep measuring your peak flow at this time to ensure that it stays at the same level.

If your peak flow values are below what they should be, your doctor may change your inhaler or increase the dose of the one that you are on.

When you are well and your peak flow speed is steady and at its best, you won't have to use your meter every day, just at certain times to stay in control, such as:

- When you have a runny nose or feel a cold coming on
- When you just don't feel as well as usual
- When you know you have been near something that makes your asthma worse (a trigger)
- When your treatment has been changed
- Before a visit to your doctor.

What do I do if my readings are down?

Ask your doctor to write you a Self-Management Plan, which tells you what to do if your readings drop and your asthma symptoms increase. If you follow your plan and your readings still keep dropping, see your doctor.

How do I keep my meter clean?

Follow the manufacturer's instructions. Generally, wash it in warm soapy water, rinse, shake and leave to dry. Clean every few weeks when in use.

Replacement is recommended every 1-2 years – every year if they are used frequently.

The Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ can help you

The Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ is New Zealand's not-for-profit sector authority on asthma and other respiratory illnesses. We advocate to government and raise awareness of respiratory illnesses, fund research for better treatments and educate on best practice.