

Peak Flow Meters: What, How, When and Why

WHY USE A PEAK FLOW METER?

WHAT? A peak flow meter is a device that measures how well a patient is breathing; it can detect breathing difficulties even before other symptoms of an asthma flare or episode occur. In fact, a first sign of an asthma flare is a drop in the peak flow reading. Devices differ by manufacturer but each has 3 color “zones”: Green, Yellow and Red. These color zones indicate how open the airways are. Green = open airways, the patient feels well and can perform all normal activities. Yellow = airways are blocking, the patient doesn’t feel very well, activity is slowed down and it may mean using additional medications. Red = danger! This means the airways are closed; the patient feels very ill, has great difficulty breathing and may even have blue lips or fingertips. The patient requires immediate help, more medications and perhaps emergency care.

The peak flow meter is a *gauge* and reading results will be different for each patient. Every patient has a “best number” which means the biggest, fastest breath blown into the meter when the patient feels well and has no symptoms of asthma. This number will vary for the individual depending on time taken; it is usually lower in the morning. If the patient is a child, as the child grows taller, their number will also increase.

HOW? To take an accurate reading to determine a “personal best” number, the patient should stand straight, inhale as deeply as they can and blow as fast and hard into the meter as possible. The gauge will climb next to a number on the meter (lines on the meter are like a ruler, not all numbers are written on it. Usually each line counts for 10). Use a Peak Flow Meter diary and record the first number. Move the arrow back to zero and repeat this blowing exercise a total of 3 times. Record the best or highest of these numbers on the diary. This is the “personal best”.

WHEN? Follow your doctor’s instructions of when and how often to use it to get the initial “personal best” reading. Your doctor may recommend using it twice a day for a couple weeks, especially when beginning new medications. Some doctors recommend using it in the morning before taking medications, or both before and after taking medicine to see how well the medicine is working. Once a personal best number is determined, it’s best to use the pfm at least once a day and record the numbers on a Diary (chart). This will help control asthma flares.

WHY? Peak flow meters can help a patient control asthma flares by indicating the airways are closing up BEFORE other symptoms occur. If the reading is in the green zone, it’s a “go”. Activity is normal. If the reading is in “yellow”, it means take caution. If the reading is in the “red”, it means stop! Get help.

The information provided is for reference only and is not a substitute for professional medical care.



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