

## Asthma: Complementary and Alternative Therapies

by [Cathy Wong](#)

Asthma is a chronic lung disease that affects at least 24 million people in the United States. Symptoms of asthma include episodes of wheezing, coughing, shortness of breath, and increased mucus production. Genetics, allergy, environment, infection, emotions, and nutrition all play a role in this disease, which causes inflammation of the airways of the lung.

### Complementary and alternative therapies are often used by people with asthma.

The most common reasons why people try alternative and complementary therapies are dissatisfaction with conventional therapies and concerns about steroid side-effects.

In a survey of 48 multicultural parents of children with asthma, 81% of the parents used one or more forms of alternative or complementary therapy to treat their child's asthma. These therapies included prayer, herbal teas, vitamins, supplements, and massage. African-American parents were more likely to rely on prayer, and Hispanic parents were more likely to use herbal and massage therapies.

Other popular treatments include the antioxidants vitamins C and E, selenium, and zinc. Omega-3 fatty acids from fish, and other supplements such as the herb [Petasites hybridus](#) are also used to decrease inflammation.

### What does the research tell us?

- Relaxation techniques and yoga may benefit lung function by affecting emotional processes, muscles, and breathing. However, more research in this area is needed.
- Probiotics are cultures of potentially beneficial bacteria that normally reside in the healthy gut. There are many different strains of probiotics; studies have found that probiotic-supplemented yogurt resulted in trends in reduced inflammation and reduced allergic symptoms. However, not all studies have had positive results; one study found no effect of yogurt consumption on asthma-related symptoms and lung function in a group of patients with asthma.
- In addition to the treatment of existing asthma, probiotics also show promise for asthma prevention. Pregnant women who had at least one first-degree relative or partner with either eczema, allergies, or asthma (related diseases), were given the probiotic *Lactobacillus GG* until six months postpartum. In the group of women who took probiotics, the incidence of infant eczema was half that of the women who took a placebo.

### Are any therapies potentially harmful?

People with asthma should always consult a licensed health care practitioner before trying any alternative or complementary therapy. Improper use of some therapies can trigger episodes and result in serious injury.

In addition, some herbal remedies, such as lobelia and pennyroyal, are potentially toxic. Medical histories for all patients should include inquiries into the use of alternative therapies.

### Other preventative measures

Patients with asthma should be considered for allergy testing and aggressive environmental control measures:

- Removal of carpet in the bedroom or over concrete.
- For people who are sensitive to pet allergens, permanent removal of the pet is recommended.
- Keeping the household humidity level at less than 50 percent to control dust mite and fungus growth.
- Removing sources of food and water and using insecticides will help control cockroach populations.
- Patients who are sensitive to mold and outdoor air pollution should consider limiting outdoor activities when these levels are high.
- Patients with asthma should avoid exposure to tobacco smoke.

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