



"The only way to know for sure whether you have asthma is to get a referral to a pulmonary function lab," says Kwan. "You blow into a machine that measures lung capacity and air flow."

Do you have asthma? How do you control it? Share your tips at besthealthmag.ca/forum.

BREATHING EASY

This respiratory therapist doesn't let her asthma slow her down

"I'll never forget the day when I was a kid and we had to give our dog away," says Felita Kwan, 41, a registered respiratory therapist (RRT). Her doctor had advised her mom, dur-

ing an appointment to deal with Kwan's asthma attacks, to get rid of the family pet, one of her triggers.

For Kwan, a professor of RRT students at the Michener Institute for Applied Health Sciences in Toronto, her asthma is allergy and exercise related, and the fact that she has lived with it since she was a young girl is partly why she became an RRT: to help others deal with it. According to Statistics Canada, three million Canadians are asthmatic, and that number is increasing, partly due to better diagnosis. In fact, the only way to be sure you have asthma, Kwan notes, is by getting a proper diagnosis. This involves a visit to your GP. If the signs are there, he or she should refer you to a pulmonary function lab for full testing. Only if you are diagnosed should you be prescribed medication.

Here are three ways Kwan lives life to the fullest despite her asthma:

1 KNOW YOUR TRIGGERS AND PRE-MEDICATE.

"Whenever I am going to visit a pet-owner's home, or if it's allergy season, I use my inhaler.

Also, I usually pop an antihistamine tablet, such as Aerius or Claritin, and sometimes use a nasal steroid spray." She avoids touching the dog or cat if she can but, being an animal lover, she sometimes can't help herself. "If I do give her a pat, I wash my hands immediately." Sometimes she needs to leave the room or even the house for a few moments so she can take some breaths of fresh air, but that's not always enough. "Once, a friend and I were in Colombia and we went out on a horse-drawn wagon. The horse's dander triggered a severe attack—so that ride was over pretty quickly!"

2 USE YOUR INHALER PROPERLY.

"It frustrates me to see so many people using their puffer incorrectly," says Kwan. Sometimes, she says, it's because they haven't been educated about the proper technique for using an inhaler: It's important to shake it vigorously for at least 30 seconds.

3 PREPARE WELL FOR EXERCISING.

Kwan likes to run year-round, and she plays beach volleyball in the summer. "Whatever exercise I'm about to do, I know that I need to warm up well to get my heart rate and breathing up gradually. If I don't, my breathing feels very constricted." (That can happen, she says, if she has to suddenly run to catch her bus to work; she'll begin to wheeze, and must take her reliever medication right away.)

Her advice for exercising in the cold if you have asthma? "Always keep your nose and mouth covered, to warm up and humidify the air before it hits your lungs."

It's easy to make these things a habit, and "totally worth it," Kwan says. "People think their quality of life has to suffer if they have asthma, and many people with the condition don't exercise enough because they think it will be harmful to their lungs. But I've found that there are ways you can live a healthy and active life with asthma, and not miss out on anything." □