2024

DIFFICULT-TO-TREAT & SEVERE ASTHMA

in adolescent and adult patients

DIAGNOSIS AND MANAGEMENT

A Short GINA Guide for Health Professionals

V5.0 November 2024

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Difficult-to-treat and severe asthma in adolescent and adult patients
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The reader acknowledges that this report is intended as an evidence-based asthma management strategy, for the use of health professionals and policy-makers. It is based, to the best of our knowledge, on current best evidence and medical knowledge and practice at the date of publication. When assessing and treating patients, health professionals are strongly advised to use their own professional judgment, and to take into account local and national regulations and guidelines. GINA cannot be held liable or responsible for inappropriate health care associated with the use of this document, including any use which is not in accordance with applicable local or national regulations or guidelines.

Abbreviations

ABPA	Allergic bronchopulmonary aspergillosis
ACE	Angiotensin-converting enzyme
ACQ	Asthma Control Questionnaire
AERD	Aspirin-exacerbated respiratory disease
ANCA	Antineutrophil cytoplasmic antibody
Anti-IL4Rα	Anti-interleukin 4 receptor alpha (monoclonal antibody)
Anti-IL5	Anti-interleukin 5 (monoclonal antibody)
Anti-IL5Rα	Anti-interleukin 5 receptor alpha (monoclonal antibody)
Anti-TSLP	Anti-thymic stromal lymphopoietin (monoclonal antibody)
BNP	B-type natriuretic peptide
CBC	Complete blood count (also known as full blood count [FBC])
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CRP	C-reactive protein
CT	Computerized tomography
CXR	Chest X-ray
DLCO	Diffusing capacity in the lung for carbon monoxide
EGPA	Eosinophilic granulomatosis with polyangiitis
FeNO	Fractional concentration of exhaled nitric oxide
FEV_1	Forced expiratory volume in 1 second (measured by spirometry)
GERD	Gastro-esophageal reflux disease (GORD in some countries)
ICS	Inhaled corticosteroid
Ig	Immunoglobulin
IL	Interleukin
IM	Intramuscular
IV	Intravenous
LABA	Long-acting $beta_2$ agonist
LAMA	Long-acting muscarinic antagonist (also called long-acting anticholinergic)
LM	Leukotriene modifier
LTRA	Leukotriene receptor antagonist
MART	Maintenance-and-reliever therapy with ICS-formoterol; in some countries called SMART (single-inhaler maintenance-and-reliever therapy)
NSAID	Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug
OCS	Oral corticosteroids
OSA	Obstructive sleep apnea
QTc	Corrected QT interval on electrocardiogram
RCT	Randomized controlled trial
SABA	Short-acting $beta_2$ agonist
SC	Subcutaneous
T2	Type 2 airway inflammation (an asthma phenotype)
TSLP	Thymic stromal lymphopoietin
VCD	Vocal cord dysfunction (included in inducible laryngeal obstruction)

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Purpose of this guide

This guide is a practical summary of GINA guidance on how to identify, assess and manage difficult-to-treat and severe asthma in adolescents and adults. It is intended for use by general practitioners (GPs, primary care physicians), pulmonary specialists and other health professionals involved in the care of people with asthma.

Comprehensive guidance on asthma management is provided in the Global Strategy for Asthma Management and Prevention (the Strategy Report), available from **www.ginasthma.org**.

How this guide was developed

This guide is based on the 2024 Strategy Report.

The recommendations were developed by the GINA Science Committee based on the most reliable sources available:

- Evidence from good-quality systematic reviews or randomized controlled trials (RCTs)
- Robust observational data for topics with no RCTs
- Expert consensus among experienced clinicians and researchers for topics with no published evidence.

The first edition of this guide and decision tree was developed through collaboration with experts in human-centered design. Best-practice information architecture and diagramming principles were employed to translate clinical guidance into effective flowcharts and graphic design, to help users find relevant information easily and apply it in practice.

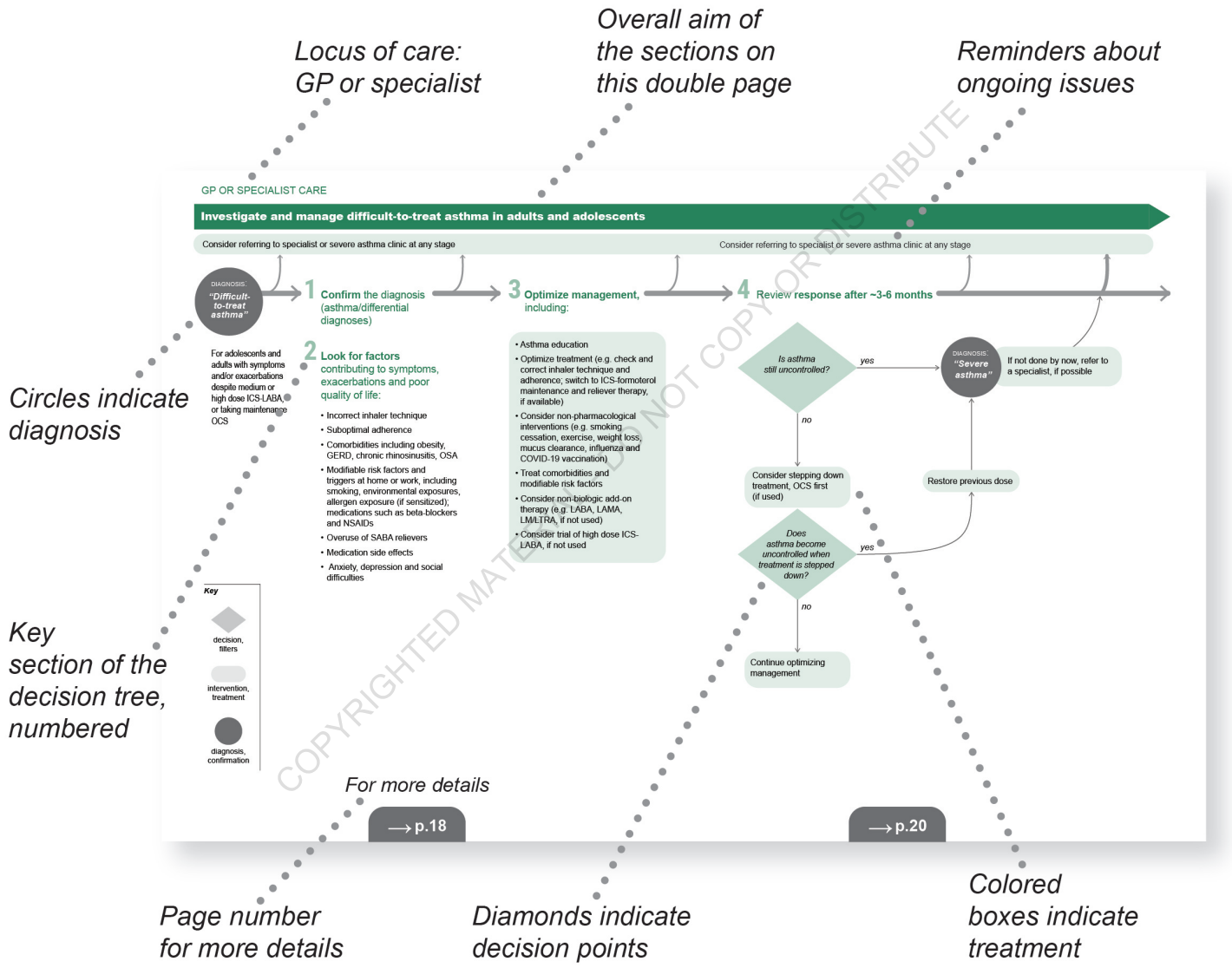
Acknowledgements are on page 31.

How to use this Guide

The **table of contents** (page 4) summarizes the overall steps involved in assessing and treating an adult or adolescent who presents with difficult-to-treat asthma (see definitions on page 8).

A **clinical decision tree** on pages 10–13 summarizes what to consider at each stage:

- **Sections 1–4 (green)** are for use in primary care and/or specialist care.
- **Sections 5–8 (blue)** are mainly relevant to respiratory specialists.
- **Sections 9–10 (brown)** are about maintaining ongoing collaborative care between the patient, primary care physician, specialist and other health professionals.



Detailed information about each numbered stage starts on page 14.

"GINA 2024 Strategy Report Box" numbers in the text refer to boxes in the 2024 Strategy Report, available at **www.ginasthma.org**.

Definitions: uncontrolled, difficult-to-treat and severe asthma

Understanding the definitions of difficult-to-treat and severe asthma starts with the concept of uncontrolled asthma.

Uncontrolled asthma includes one or both of the following:

- Poor symptom control (frequent symptoms or reliever use, activity limited by asthma, night waking due to asthma)
- Frequent exacerbations (≥2/year) requiring OCS, or serious exacerbations (≥1/year) requiring hospitalization.

Difficult-to-treat asthma is asthma that is uncontrolled despite prescribing of medium- or high-dose ICS with a second controller (usually a LABA) or with maintenance OCS, or that requires high-dose treatment to maintain good symptom control and reduce the risk of exacerbations.[1] It does not mean a 'difficult patient'. In many cases, asthma may appear to be difficult to treat because of modifiable factors such as incorrect inhaler technique, poor adherence, smoking or comorbidities, or because the diagnosis is incorrect.

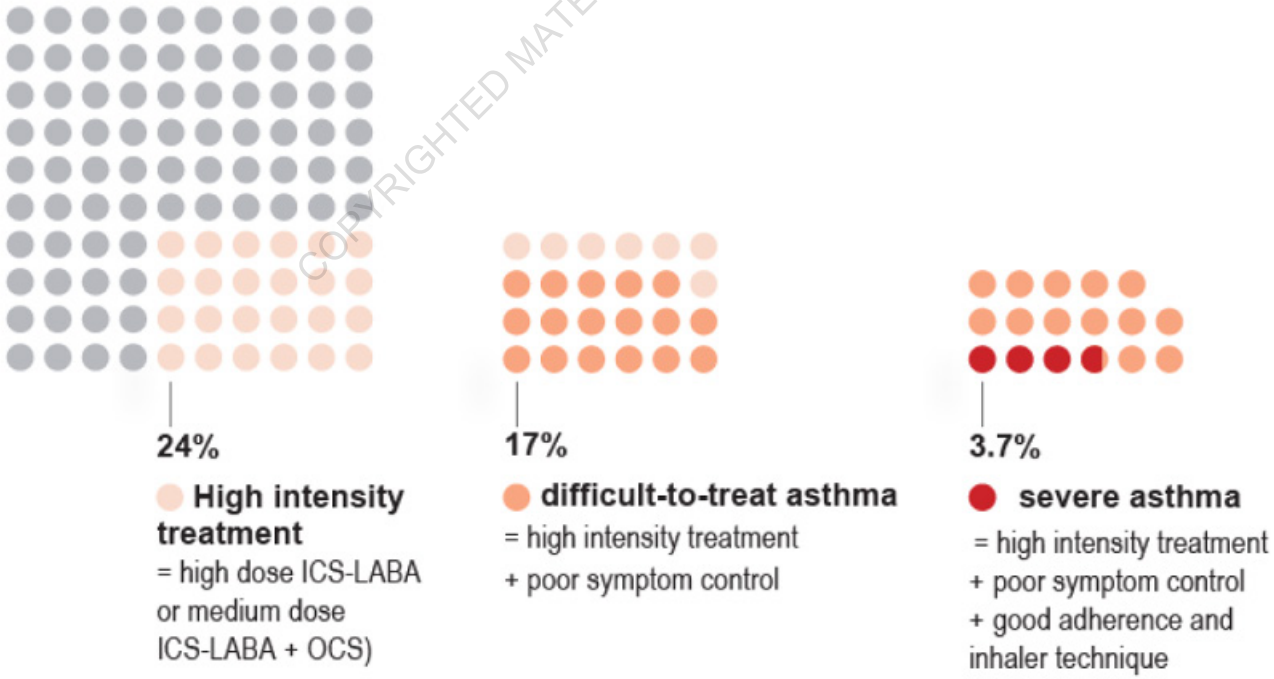
Severe asthma is a subset of difficult-to-treat asthma (Figure 1). It means asthma that is uncontrolled despite adherence with maximal optimized high-dose ICS-LABA treatment and management of contributory factors, or that worsens when high-dose treatment is decreased.[1] At present, therefore, 'severe asthma' is a retrospective label. It is sometimes called 'severe refractory asthma'[1] since it is defined by being relatively refractory to high-dose inhaled therapy. However, with the advent of biologic therapies, the word 'refractory' is no longer appropriate.

Asthma is not classified as severe if it markedly improves when contributory factors such as inhaler technique and adherence are addressed.[1]

Prevalence: how many people have severe asthma?

A study in the Netherlands estimated that around 3.7% of asthma patients have severe asthma, based on the number of patients prescribed high-dose ICS-LABA, or medium- or high-dose ICS-LABA plus long-term OCS, who had poor symptom control (by Asthma Control Questionnaire) and had good adherence and inhaler technique (Figure 1).[2]

Figure 1. What proportion of adults have difficult-to-treat or severe asthma?



Abbreviations on page 3.

Data from the Netherlands, reported by Hekking et al (2015)[2]

Importance: the impact of severe asthma

The patient perspective

Patients with severe asthma experience a heavy burden of symptoms, exacerbations and medication side-effects. Frequent shortness of breath, wheeze, chest tightness and cough interfere with day-to-day living, sleeping, and physical activity, and patients often have frightening or unpredictable exacerbations (also called attacks or severe flare-ups).

Medication side-effects are particularly common and problematic with OCS,[3] which in the past were a mainstay of treatment for severe asthma. Adverse effects of long-term or frequent OCS include obesity, diabetes, osteoporosis and fragility fractures,[4] cataracts, hypertension and adrenal suppression; psychological side-effects such as depression and anxiety are particularly concerning for patients.[5] Even short-term use of OCS is associated with sleep disturbance, and increased risk of infection, fracture and thromboembolism.[6] Strategies to minimize need for OCS are therefore a high priority.

Severe asthma often interferes with family, social and working life, limits career choices and vacation options, and affects emotional and mental health. Patients with severe asthma often feel alone and misunderstood, as their experience is so different from that of most people with asthma.[5]

Adolescents with severe asthma

The teenage years are a time of great psychological and physiological development which can impact on asthma management. It is vital to ensure that the young person has a good understanding of their condition and treatment and appropriate knowledge to enable supported self-management. The process of transition from pediatric to adult care should help support the young person in gaining greater autonomy and responsibility for their own health and wellbeing. Severe asthma may improve over 3 years in approximately 30% of male and female adolescents; the only predictor of asthma becoming non-severe was higher baseline blood eosinophils.[7] Studies with longer follow-up time are needed.

Healthcare utilization and costs

Severe asthma has very high healthcare costs due to medications, physician visits, hospitalizations, and the costs of OCS side-effects. In a UK study, healthcare costs per patient were higher than for type 2 diabetes, stroke, or COPD.[8] In a Canadian study, severe uncontrolled asthma was estimated to account for more than 60% of asthma costs.[9]

Patients with severe asthma and their families also bear a significant financial burden, not only for medical care and medications, but also through lost earnings and career choices.

Management: severe asthma decision tree

The decision tree (Figures 2–5) summarizes a stage-by-stage, evidence-based approach to investigating and managing difficult-to-treat asthma in adults and adolescents, assessing and treating severe asthma phenotypes, and monitoring/adjusting severe asthma treatment.

Figure 2. Decision tree – investigate and manage difficult to treat asthma in adult and adolescent patients

GP OR SPECIALIST CARE

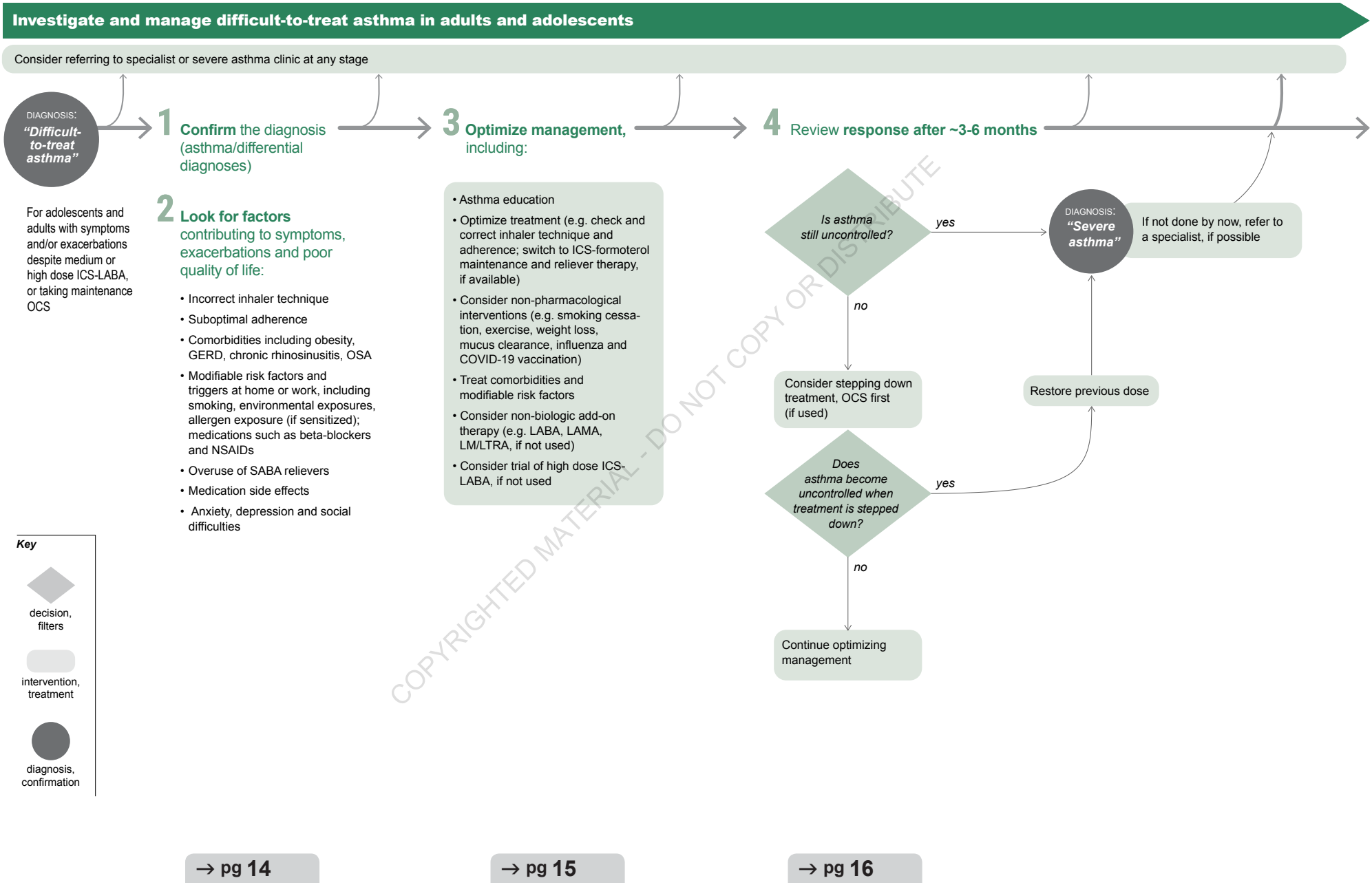


Figure 3. Decision tree – assess and treat severe asthma phenotypes

SPECIALIST CARE; SEVERE ASTHMA CLINIC IF AVAILABLE

Assess and treat severe asthma phenotypes

Continue to optimize management as in section **3** (including inhaler technique, adherence, comorbidities, non-pharmacologic strategies)

5 ***Investigate*** further and provide ***patient support***

- Investigate for comorbidities/differential diagnoses and treat/refer as appropriate
  - Consider: CBC, CRP, IgG, IgA, IgM, IgE, fungal precipitins; CXR and/or HRCT chest; DLCO; DEXA scan
  - Skin prick testing or specific IgE for relevant allergens, if not already done
  - Consider screening for adrenal insufficiency in patients taking maintenance OCS or high dose ICS
  - If blood eosinophils ≥300/µl, look for and treat non-asthma causes, including parasites (e.g. Strongyloides serology, or stool examination)
  - If hypereosinophilia e.g. ≥1500/µl, consider causes such as EGPA
  - Other directed testing (e.g. ANCA, CT sinuses, BNP, echocardiogram) based on clinical suspicion
- Consider need for social/psychological support
- Involve multidisciplinary team care (if available)
- Invite patient to enroll in registry (if available) or clinical trial (if appropriate)

6 Assess the ***severe asthma phenotype***

Could patient have Type 2 airway inflammation?

yes

Type 2 airway inflammation

- Consider adherence tests
- Consider increasing the ICS dose for 3-6 months
- Consider add-on non-biologic treatment for specific Type 2 clinical phenotypes, e.g. AERD, ABPA, chronic rhinosinusitis, nasal polyposis, atopic dermatitis

Is add-on Type 2 biologic therapy available/ affordable?

yes

7 Consider ***other*** treatments

no

If add-on Type 2-targeted biologic therapy is NOT available/affordable

- Consider higher dose ICS, if not used
- Consider other add-on therapy (e.g. LAMA, LM/LTRA, low dose azithromycin)
- As last resort, consider add-on low dose OCS, but implement strategies to minimize side-effects
- Stop ineffective add-on therapies

Go to section **10**

no

Type 2 inflammation

- Blood eosinophils ≥150/µl and/or
- FeNO ≥20 ppb and/or
- Sputum eosinophils ≥2%, and/or
- Asthma is clinically allergen-driven

(Repeat blood eosinophils and FeNO up to 3x, at least 1-2 weeks after OCS or on lowest possible OCS dose)

*Note: these are **not** the criteria for add-on biologic therapy (see **8**)*

No evidence of Type 2 airway inflammation

- Review the basics: differential diagnosis, inhaler technique, adherence, comorbidities, side-effects
- Avoid exposures (tobacco smoke, allergens, irritants)
- Consider investigations (if available and not done)
  - Sputum induction
  - High resolution chest CT
  - Bronchoscopy for alternative/additional diagnoses
- Consider trial of add-on treatments (if available and not already tried)
  - LAMA
  - Low dose azithromycin
  - Anti-IL4Rα* if taking maintenance OCS
  - Anti-TSLP* (but insufficient evidence in patients on maintenance OCS)
  - As last resort, consider add-on low dose OCS, but implement strategies to minimize side-effects
- Consider bronchial thermoplasty (+ registry)
- Stop ineffective add-on therapies

Not currently eligible for T2-targeted biologic therapy

Go to section **10**

* *Check local eligibility criteria for specific biologic therapies as these may vary from those listed*

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Figure 4. Decision tree – consider add-on biologic Type 2-targeted treatments

SPECIALIST CARE; SEVERE ASTHMA CLINIC IF AVAILABLE

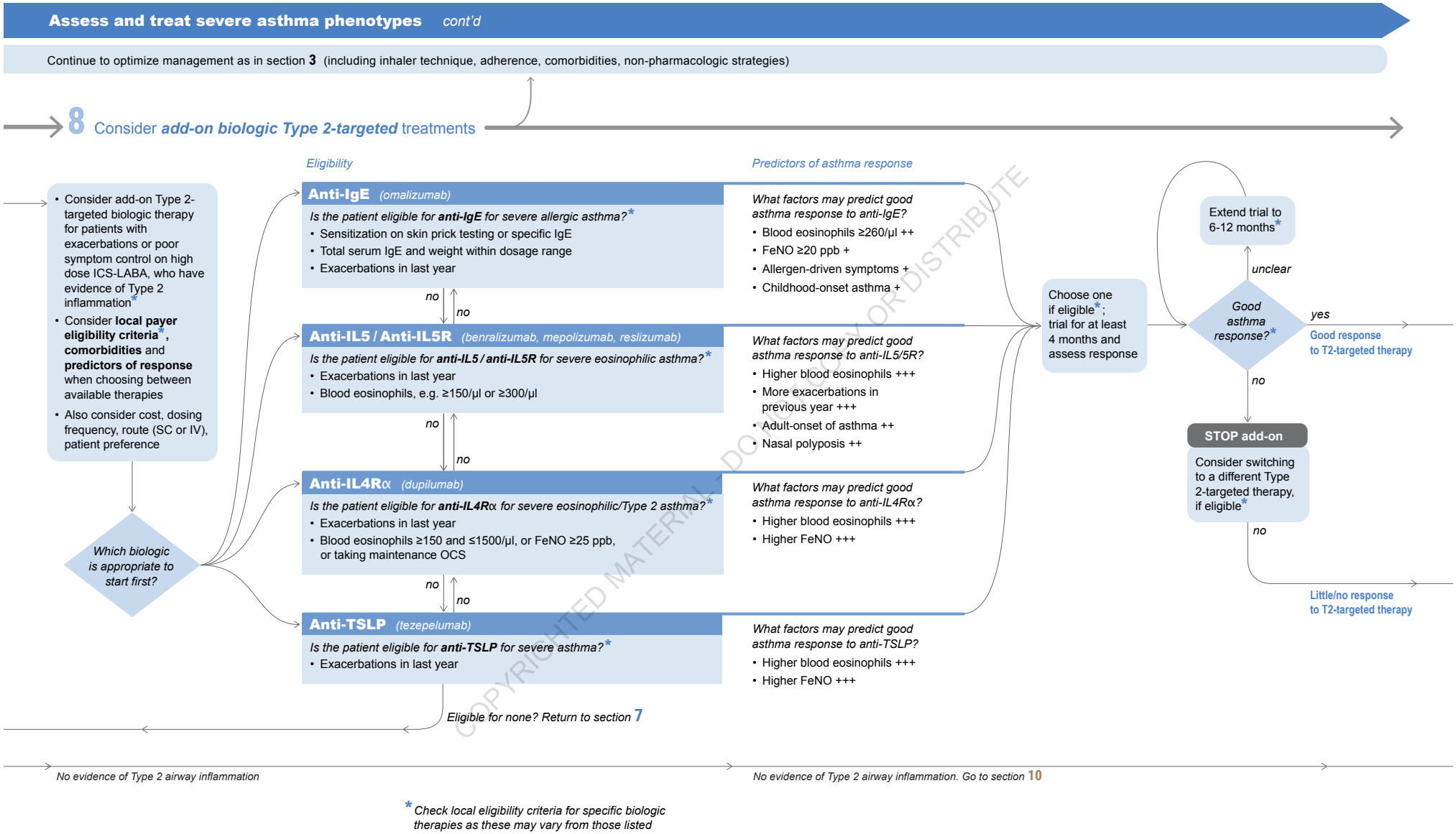

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Figure 5. Decision tree – monitor and manage severe asthma treatment

SPECIALIST AND PRIMARY CARE IN COLLABORATION

Monitor / Manage severe asthma treatment

Continue to optimize management

9 Review **response**

- Asthma: symptom control, exacerbations, lung function
- Type 2 comorbidities e.g. nasal polyposis, atopic dermatitis
- Medications: treatment intensity, side-effects, affordability
- Patient satisfaction

yes

If good response to Type 2-targeted therapy

- Re-evaluate the patient every 3-6 months*
- First, consider decreasing/stopping OCS (and check for adrenal insufficiency) then consider stopping other add-on asthma medications
- Then, if asthma well-controlled for 3-6 months, consider reducing maintenance ICS-LABA dose, but do not stop maintenance ICS-LABA. See text for details.
- Re-evaluate need for ongoing biologic therapy
- Order of reduction of treatments based on observed benefit, potential side-effects, cost and patient preference

no

If no good response to Type 2-targeted therapy

- Stop the biologic therapy
- Review the basics: differential diagnosis, inhaler technique, adherence, comorbidities, side-effects, emotional support
- Consider high resolution chest CT (if not done)
- Reassess phenotype and treatment options
  - Induced sputum (if available)
  - Consider add-on low dose azithromycin
  - Consider bronchoscopy for alternative/additional diagnoses
  - As last resort, consider add-on low dose OCS, but implement strategies to minimize side-effects
  - Consider bronchial thermoplasty (+ registry)
- Stop ineffective add-on therapies
- Do not stop ICS

No evidence of Type 2 airway inflammation. Go to section **10**

10 Continue to **optimize management** as in section **3**, including:

- Inhaler technique
- Adherence
- Comorbidity management
- Non-pharmacologic strategies
- Patients' social/emotional needs
- Two-way communication with GP for ongoing care

Notes:

* *Check local eligibility criteria for specific biologic therapies as these may vary from those listed*

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Investigate and manage difficult-to-treat asthma in adults and adolescents

1 Confirm the diagnosis (asthma or differential diagnoses)

Stages 1–4 (Figure 2) can be carried out in primary or specialist care. A patient is classified as having difficult-to-treat asthma if they have persistent asthma symptoms and/or exacerbations despite prescribing of medium or high-dose ICS with another controller such as LABA, or maintenance OCS, or require high-dose ICS-LABA treatment to maintain good symptom control and prevent exacerbations. Difficult-to-treat asthma does not mean a 'difficult patient'.

Consider referral to a specialist or severe asthma clinic at any stage, particularly if:

- There is difficulty confirming the diagnosis of asthma
- Patient has frequent urgent healthcare utilization
- Patient needs frequent or maintenance OCS
- Occupational asthma is suspected
- The patient has food allergy or anaphylaxis, as this increases the risk of death
- Symptoms are suggestive of infective or cardiac cause
- Symptoms are suggestive of complications such as bronchiectasis
- Patient has multimorbidity.

Are the symptoms due to asthma?

Perform a careful history and physical examination to identify whether symptoms are typical of asthma, or are more likely due to an alternative diagnosis or comorbidity:

- **Dyspnea:** COPD, obesity, cardiac disease, deconditioning
- **Cough:** inducible laryngeal obstruction (also called vocal cord dysfunction, VCD), upper airway cough syndrome (also called post-nasal drip), gastro-esophageal reflux disease (GERD), bronchiectasis, ACE inhibitors
- **Wheeze:** obesity, COPD, tracheobronchomalacia, VCD

Investigate according to clinical suspicion and age (see GINA 2024 Strategy Report Box 1-3).

How can the diagnosis of asthma be confirmed?

Confirmation of the diagnosis is important, because in 12–50% of people assumed to have severe asthma, asthma is not found to be the correct diagnosis.[10] Perform spirometry, before and after bronchodilator, to assess baseline lung function and seek objective evidence of variable expiratory airflow limitation. If initial bronchodilator responsiveness testing is negative (<200 mL or <12% increase in FEV_1), consider repeating after withholding bronchodilators or when symptomatic, or consider stepping controller treatment up or down before further investigations such as bronchial provocation testing (see GINA 2024 Strategy Report Box 1-4). Check full flow-volume curve to assess for upper airway obstruction. If spirometry is not available, measure peak expiratory flow (PEF) before and after bronchodilator (highest of 3 PEF each time); an increase in PEF ≥20% supports the diagnosis of asthma. If spirometry is normal, provide the patient with a peak flow meter and diary for assessing variability; consider bronchial provocation testing if patient is able to withhold bronchodilators (short-acting $beta_2$ agonist [SABA] for at least 6 hours, LABA for up to 2 days depending on duration of action).[11] For more details, see GINA 2024 Strategy Report Box 1-2. Strategies for confirming the diagnosis of asthma in patients already taking ICS-containing treatment are shown in GINA 2024 Strategy Report Box 1-4).

Airflow limitation may be persistent in patients with long-standing asthma, due to remodeling of the airway walls, or limited lung development in childhood. It is important to document lung function when the diagnosis of asthma is first made. Specialist advice should be obtained if the history is suggestive of asthma but the diagnosis cannot be confirmed by spirometry.

2 Look for factors contributing to symptoms and exacerbations

Systematically consider factors that may be contributing to uncontrolled symptoms or exacerbations, or poor quality of life, and that can be treated. The most important modifiable factors include:

- **Incorrect inhaler technique** (seen in up to 80% patients): ask the patient to show you how they use their inhaler; compare with a checklist or video.
- **Suboptimal adherence** (up to 75% asthma patients): ask empathically about frequency of use *(e.g. 'Many patients don't use their inhaler as prescribed. In the last 4 weeks, how many days a week have you been taking it – not at all, 1 day a week, 2, 3 or more?' or, 'Do you find it easier to remember your inhaler in the morning or the evening?'* (see GINA 2024 Strategy Report Box 5-3). Ask about barriers to medication use, including cost, and concerns about necessity or side-effects. Check dates on inhalers and view dispensing data, if available. Electronic inhaler monitoring, if available, can be helpful in screening for poor adherence, in some cases avoiding the need for biologic therapy.[12]
- **Comorbidities:** review history and examination for comorbidities that can contribute to respiratory symptoms, exacerbations, or poor quality of life. These include anxiety and depression, obesity, deconditioning, chronic rhinosinusitis, inducible laryngeal obstruction, GERD, COPD, obstructive sleep apnea, bronchiectasis, cardiac disease, and kyphosis due to osteoporosis. Investigate according to clinical suspicion.
- **Modifiable risk factors and triggers:** identify factors that increase the risk of exacerbations, e.g. smoking, environmental tobacco exposure, other environmental exposures at home or work including allergens (if sensitized), indoor and outdoor air pollution, molds and noxious chemicals, and medications such as beta-blockers or nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). For allergens, check for sensitization using skin prick testing or specific IgE.
- **Regular or over-use of SABAs:** regular SABA use causes beta-receptor down-regulation and reduction in response,[13] leading in turn to greater use. Over-use may also be habitual. Dispensing of ≥3 SABA canisters per year (corresponding to average use more than daily) is associated with increased risk of emergency department visit or hospitalization independent of severity,[14,15] and dispensing of ≥12 canisters per year (one a month) with substantially increased risk of death.[15,16] Risks are higher with nebulized SABA.[17]
- **Anxiety, depression and social and economic problems:** these are very common in asthma, particularly in difficult asthma[5] and contribute to symptoms, impaired quality of life, and poor adherence.
- **Medication side-effects:** systemic effects, particularly with frequent or continuous OCS, or long-term high dose ICS may contribute to poor quality of life and increase the likelihood of poor adherence. Local side-effects of dysphonia or candidiasis may occur with high dose or potent ICS, especially if inhaler technique is poor. Consider drug interactions including risk of adrenal suppression with use of P450 inhibitors such as itraconazole.

3 Review and optimize management

Review and optimize treatment for asthma, and for comorbidities and risk factors identified at Stage 2. For more details on multimorbidity, see GINA 2024 Strategy Report chapter 6.

- **Provide asthma self-management education**, and confirm that patient has (and knows how to use) a personalized written or electronic asthma action plan. Refer to an asthma educator if available.
- **Optimize asthma medications:** confirm that the inhaler is suitable for the patient; check and correct inhaler technique with a physical demonstration and teach-back method, check inhaler technique again at each visit.[18] Address suboptimal adherence, both intentional and unintentional.[19] Switch to ICS-formoterol maintenance-and-reliever therapy (MART) if available, to reduce the risk of exacerbations.[20]
- **Consider non-pharmacologic add-on therapy**, e.g. smoking cessation, physical exercise,[21] healthy diet, weight loss, mucus clearance strategies, influenza vaccination, breathing exercises, allergen avoidance, if feasible, for patients who are sensitized and exposed. For details see GINA 2024 Strategy Report Box 3-6 and following text.

- **Treat comorbidities and modifiable risk factors** identified in Stage 2 of the decision tree, where there is evidence for benefit; however, there is no evidence to support routine treatment of asymptomatic GERD (see GINA 2024 Strategy Report page 118). Avoid medications that make asthma worse (beta-blockers including eye-drops, aspirin and other NSAIDs in patients with aspirin-exacerbated respiratory disease; see GINA 2024 Strategy Report page 128). Refer for management of mental health problems if relevant.
- **Consider trial of non-biologic medication** added to medium/high dose ICS, e.g., LABA, LAMA, LTRA if not already tried. Note concerns about neuropsychiatric adverse effects with montelukast LTRA.[22]
- **Consider short-term (3–6 months) trial of high-dose ICS-LABA** , if not currently used.

4 Review response after ~3–6 months

Schedule a review visit to assess the response to the above interventions. Timing of the review visit depends on clinical urgency and what changes to treatment have been made.

When assessing the response to treatment, specifically review:

- Symptom control (symptom frequency, SABA reliever use, night waking due to asthma, activity limitation)
- Exacerbations since previous visit, and how they were managed
- Medication side-effects
- Inhaler technique and adherence
- Lung function
- Patient satisfaction and concerns.

→ *Is asthma still uncontrolled, despite optimized therapy?*

YES: if asthma is still uncontrolled, the diagnosis of severe asthma has been confirmed. If not done by now, refer the patient to a specialist or severe asthma clinic if possible.

NO: if asthma is now well controlled, consider stepping down treatment. Start by decreasing/ceasing OCS first (if used), checking for adrenal insufficiency, then remove other add-on therapy, then decrease ICS dose, but do not stop ICS. See GINA 2024 Strategy Report Box 4-13 for guidance on how to gradually down-titrate treatment intensity.

→ *Does asthma become uncontrolled when treatment is stepped down?*

YES: if asthma symptoms become uncontrolled or an exacerbation occurs when high-dose treatment is stepped down, the diagnosis of severe asthma has been confirmed. Restore the patient's previous dose to regain good asthma control, and refer to a specialist or severe asthma clinic, if possible, if not done already.

NO: if symptoms and exacerbations remain well controlled despite treatment being stepped down, the patient does not have severe asthma. Continue optimizing management.

5 Investigate further and provide patient support

Further assessment and management (Figures 3–4) should be by a specialist, preferably in a multidisciplinary severe asthma clinic if available. The team may include a certified asthma educator and health professionals from fields such as speech pathology, otorhinolaryngology, social work and mental health.

What other tests may be considered at the specialist level?

Additional investigations may be appropriate for identifying less common comorbidities and differential diagnoses contributing to symptoms and/or exacerbations. Tests should be based on clinical suspicion, and may include:

- Blood tests: complete blood count, CRP, IgG, IgA, IgM, IgE, fungal precipitins including Aspergillus
- Allergy testing for clinically relevant allergens: skin prick test or specific IgE, if not already done
- Other pulmonary investigations: diffusing capacity of the lungs for carbon monoxide (DLCO), chest X-ray or high-resolution chest computed tomography (CT)
- Bone density scan, because of risk of osteoporosis with maintenance or frequent OCS or long-term high dose ICS.[23]
- Other directed testing based on clinical suspicion, e.g., antineutrophil cytoplasmic antibodies (ANCA), CT sinuses, B-natriuretic peptide (BNP), echocardiogram.

If blood eosinophils are ≥300/μL, look for and treat non-asthma causes, including parasites (e.g., Strongyloides serology or stool examination), because parasitic infection may be the cause of the blood eosinophilia, and because OCS or biologic therapy in a patient with untreated parasitic infection could potentially lead to disseminated disease. Strongyloides infection is usually asymptomatic.[24]

If hypereosinophilia is found, e.g., blood eosinophils ≥1500/μL, consider causes such as eosinophilic granulomatosis with polyangiitis (EGPA).

Consider need for social/psychological support

Refer patients to support services, where available, to help them deal with the emotional, social and financial burden of asthma and its treatment, including during and after severe exacerbations.[5] Consider the need for psychological or psychiatric referral, including for patients with anxiety and/or depression.

Involve multidisciplinary team care (if available)

Multidisciplinary assessment and treatment of patients with severe asthma increases the identification of comorbidities, and improves outcomes.[25]

Invite patient to enroll in a registry (if available) or clinical trial (if appropriate)

Systematic collection of data will help in understanding the mechanisms and burden of severe asthma. There is a need for pragmatic clinical trials in severe asthma, including studies comparing two or more active treatments. Participants in randomized controlled trials designed for regulatory purposes may not necessarily be representative of patients seen in clinical practice. For example, a registry study found that over 80% of patients with severe asthma would have been excluded from key studies evaluating biologic therapy.[26]

6 Assess the severe asthma phenotype

The next step is to assess the patient's inflammatory phenotype – is it Type 2 high or low?

What is Type 2 inflammation?

Type 2 inflammation is found in the majority of people with severe asthma. It is characterized by cytokines such as interleukin (IL)-4, IL-5 and IL-13, which are often produced by the adaptive immune system on recognition of allergens. It may also be activated by viruses, bacteria and irritants that stimulate the innate immune system via production of IL-33, IL-25 and thymic stromal lymphopoietin (TSLP) by epithelial cells. Type 2 inflammation is often characterized by elevated eosinophils or increased fractional exhaled nitric oxide (FeNO), and it may be accompanied by atopy and elevated IgE, whereas non-Type 2 inflammation is often characterized by increased neutrophils.[27]

In many patients with asthma, Type 2 inflammation rapidly improves when ICS are taken regularly and correctly; these patients do not have severe asthma. In severe asthma, Type 2 inflammation may be relatively refractory to high-dose ICS. It may respond to OCS but their serious adverse effects[3,28] mean that alternative treatments should be sought.

In adult patients with uncontrolled asthma despite medium- or high-dose ICS plus LABA or other controllers, a history of exacerbations in the previous year, higher blood eosinophil counts and higher FeNO levels are associated with a greater risk of severe exacerbations.[29]

Could the patient have refractory or underlying Type 2 inflammation?

The possibility of refractory Type 2 inflammation should be considered if any of the following are found while the patient is taking high-dose ICS or daily OCS:

- Blood eosinophils ≥150/µl, and/or
- FeNO ≥20ppb, and/or
- Sputum eosinophils ≥2%, and/or
- Asthma is clinically allergen-driven.

Patients requiring maintenance OCS may also have underlying Type 2 inflammation. However, biomarkers of Type 2 inflammation (blood eosinophils, sputum eosinophils and FeNO) are often suppressed by OCS. If possible, therefore, these tests should be performed before starting OCS (a short course, or maintenance treatment), or at least 1–2 weeks after a course of OCS, or on the lowest possible OCS dose.

The above criteria are suggested for initial assessment; those for blood eosinophils and FeNO are based on the lowest levels associated with response to some biologics. They are not the criteria for eligibility for Type 2-targeted biologic therapy, which may differ – see section 8 and local criteria.

Consider repeating blood eosinophils and FeNO up to 3 times (e.g., when asthma worsens, before giving OCS, or at least 1–2 weeks after a course of OCS, or on the lowest possible OCS dose), before assuming asthma is non-Type 2. One study of patients with uncontrolled asthma taking medium- to high-dose ICS-LABA found that 65% had a shift in their blood eosinophil category over 48–56 weeks.[30]

Why is the inflammatory phenotype assessed on high dose ICS?

- Most RCT evidence about Type 2 targeted biologics is in such patients.
- Modifiable ICS treatment problems such as poor adherence and incorrect inhaler technique are common causes of uncontrolled Type 2 inflammation.
- Currently, the high cost of biologic therapies generally precludes their widespread clinical use in patients whose symptoms or exacerbations and Type 2 biomarkers are found to respond to ICS when it is taken correctly.

7.1 Consider other treatments if there is NO evidence of Type 2 inflammation

If the patient has no evidence of persistent Type 2 inflammation (Section 6):

- Review the basics for factors that may be contributing to symptoms or exacerbations: differential diagnosis, inhaler technique, adherence, comorbidities, medication side-effects (Section 2).
- Recommend avoidance of relevant exposures (tobacco smoke, pollution, allergens if sensitized and there is evidence of benefit from withdrawal, irritants, infections). Ask about exposures at home and at work.
- Consider additional diagnostic investigations (if available and not already done): sputum induction to confirm inflammatory phenotype, high resolution chest CT, bronchoscopy to exclude unusual comorbidities or alternative diagnoses such as tracheobronchomalacia or sub-glottic stenosis; functional laryngoscopy for inducible laryngeal obstruction.
- Consider a trial of add-on treatment if available and not already tried (but check local eligibility and payer criteria for specific therapies as they may vary from those listed):
  - LAMA[31]
  - Low-dose azithromycin (adults)[32,33] but first check sputum for atypical mycobacteria, check ECG for long QTc (and re-check after a month on treatment), and consider potential for antibiotic resistance.
  - Anti-IL4Rα if taking maintenance OCS (see Section 8 for more details)
  - Anti-TSLP thymic stromal lymphopoietin), but insufficient evidence in patients taking maintenance OCS (see Section 8 for more details)
  - As a last resort, consider add-on low dose OCS, but implement strategies such as alternate-day treatment to help reduce the dose further and minimize side-effects.
- Consider bronchial thermoplasty, with registry enrollment. However, the evidence for efficacy and long-term safety is limited.[34,35]
- Stop ineffective add-on therapies.
- Continue to optimize treatment, including inhaler technique, adherence, non-pharmacologic strategies and treating comorbidities (see Sections 3 and 10).

7.2 Consider non-biologic options if there IS evidence of type 2 inflammation

For patients with elevated Type 2 biomarkers despite high dose ICS (see Section 5), consider non-biologic options first, given the current high cost of biologic therapy:

- **Assess adherence objectively** by monitoring of prescribing or dispensing records, blood prednisone levels,[36] or electronic inhaler monitoring.[37] Suppression of high FeNO after 5 days of directly observed therapy is an indicator of past poor adherence.[38]
- **Consider increasing the ICS dose** for 3–6 months, and review again.
- **Consider add-on non-biologic treatment for specific Type 2 clinical phenotypes.** For example, for aspirin-exacerbated respiratory disease (AERD), consider add-on LTRA and possibly aspirin desensitization (see GINA 2024 Strategy Report page 128). For allergic bronchopulmonary aspergillosis (ABPA), consider add-on OCS ± anti-fungal agent (see GINA 2024 Strategy Report page 129). For chronic rhinosinusitis with or without nasal polyps, consider intensive intranasal corticosteroids; surgical advice may be needed (see GINA 2024 Strategy Report page 120). For patients with atopic dermatitis, topical steroidal or non-steroidal therapy may be helpful. Allergen immunotherapy may sometimes be used in severe asthma, but only after asthma has been well controlled, to minimize the risk of severe adverse reactions. Allergen immunotherapy extracts should only be prepared and administered by clinicians skilled in immunotherapy (see GINA 2024 Strategy Report page 104).

7.3 Is Type 2-targeted biologic therapy available and affordable?

If NOT:

- Consider higher dose ICS-LABA, if not used.
- Consider other add-on therapy, e.g. LAMA, LTRA, low dose azithromycin if not used.
- As last resort, consider add-on low dose OCS, but implement strategies to minimize side-effects.
- Stop ineffective add-on therapies.
- Continue to optimize treatment, including inhaler technique, adherence, non-pharmacologic strategies and treating comorbidities (see Stages 3 and 10).

CONSIDER TYPE 2-TARGETED BIOLOGIC THERAPIES

8 Consider add-on biologic Type 2-targeted treatments

If available and affordable, consider an add-on Type 2 targeted biologic for patients with exacerbations and/or poor symptom control despite taking at least high-dose ICS-LABA, and who have allergic or eosinophilic biomarkers or need maintenance OCS (Figure 4). Where relevant, test for parasitic infection, and treat if present, before commencing treatment (see Section 5).

Consider whether to start first with anti-IgE, anti-IL5/5Rα, anti-IL4Rα or anti-TSLP. When choosing between available therapies, consider the following:

- Does the patient satisfy local payer eligibility criteria*?
- Type 2 comorbidities such as atopic dermatitis, nasal polyps
- Predictors of asthma response (see below)
- Cost
- Dosing frequency
- Delivery route (IV or SC; potential for self-administration)
- Patient preference.

Always check local payer eligibility criteria for biologic therapy, as they may vary substantially. However, GINA recommends the use of biologic therapy only for patients with severe asthma, and only after treatment has been optimized. For any biologic therapy, ensure that the manufacturer's and/or regulator's instructions for storage, administration and the duration of monitoring post-administration are followed.

Provide the patient with advice about what to do if they experience any adverse effects, including hypersensitivity reactions. Omalizumab injections contain polysorbate, which may induce allergic reactions in some patients. GINA suggests that the first dose of asthma biologic therapy should not be given on the same day as a vaccine such as for COVID-19, so that adverse effects of either can be more easily distinguished.

Provide practical advice for patients, e.g., allow the refrigerated syringe or pen to come to room temperature before injecting the biologic, as this reduces pain.

There is an urgent need for head-to-head comparisons of different biologics in patients eligible for more than one biologic.

→ *Add-on anti-IgE for severe allergic asthma*

Regulatory approvals may include: omalizumab for ages ≥6 years, given by SC injection every 2–4 weeks, with dose based on weight and serum IgE. May also be indicated for nasal polyps and chronic spontaneous (idiopathic) urticaria. Self-administration may be an option. Check local regulatory and payer criteria, as they may differ from these.

Mechanism: binds to Fc part of free IgE, preventing binding of IgE to FcƐR1 receptors, reducing free IgE and down-regulating receptor expression

Eligibility criteria (in addition to criteria for severe asthma) may vary between payers or by age-group, but often include:

- Sensitization to inhaled allergen(s) on skin prick testing or specific IgE, and
- Total serum IgE and body weight within local dosing range, and
- More than a specified number of exacerbations within the last year.

Outcomes: Meta-analysis of RCTs in severe allergic asthma: anti-IgE led to 44% decrease in severe exacerbations, and improved quality of life; improvements in symptom control and lung function were statistically significant but less than clinically important differences.[39] No double-blind randomized controlled trials of OCS-sparing effect. In a meta-analysis of observational studies in patients with severe allergic asthma, there was a 59% reduction in exacerbation rate, a 41% reduction in the proportion of patients receiving maintenance OCS, and a significant improvement in symptom control.[40] In patients with nasal polyps, omalizumab improved subjective and objective nasal outcomes.[41] For more details about treatment of chronic rhinosinusitis with nasal polyps (CRSwNP), see GINA 2024 Strategy Report page 120. A registry study of omalizumab in pregnancy found no increased risk of congenital malformations.[42]

Potential predictors of good asthma response to omalizumab:

- Baseline IgE level does not predict likelihood of response[43]
- In a post-hoc analysis of one clinical trial, a greater decrease in exacerbations was observed (compared with placebo) with blood eosinophils ≥260/μL[44,45] or FeNO ≥19.5 ppb[44] (these criteria representing their median value in that study) but in two large observational studies, exacerbations were reduced with both low or high blood eosinophils[46-48] or with both low or high FeNO.[48]
- Childhood-onset asthma
- Clinical history suggesting allergen-driven symptoms.

Adverse effects: injection site reactions, anaphylaxis in approximately 0.2% patients.[49] In adults, long-term safety and efficacy of omalizumab have been reported over up to 5 years of treatment.[50]

Suggested initial trial: at least 4 months

→ *Add-on anti-IL5 or anti-IL5Rα for severe eosinophilic asthma*

Regulatory approvals may include: For ages ≥12 years: mepolizumab (anti-IL5), 100 mg by SC injection every 4 weeks, or benralizumab (anti-IL5 receptor α), 30 mg by SC injection every 4 weeks for 3 doses then every 8 weeks. For ages ≥18 years: reslizumab (anti-IL5), 3 mg/kg by IV infusion every 4 weeks. For ages 6–11 years, mepolizumab (anti-IL5), 40 mg by SC injection every 4 weeks. Mepolizumab may also be indicated for eosinophilic granulomatosis with polyangiitis (EGPA), hypereosinophilic syndrome, and chronic rhinosinusitis with nasal polyps. Self-administration may be an option. Check local regulatory and payer criteria, as they may differ from these.

Mechanism: mepolizumab and reslizumab bind circulating IL-5; benralizumab binds to IL-5 receptor alpha subunit leading to apoptosis (cell death) of eosinophils.

Eligibility criteria (in addition to criteria for severe asthma): these vary by product and between payers, but usually include:

- More than a specified number of severe exacerbations in the last year, and
- Blood eosinophils above locally specified level (e.g. ≥150 or ≥300/μl). There is sometimes a different eosinophil cut-point for patients taking OCS.

Outcomes: Meta-analysis of RCTs in severe asthma patients with exacerbations in the last year, with varying eosinophil criteria: anti-IL5 and anti-IL5Rα led to 47–54% reduction in severe exacerbations. Improvements in lung function and symptom control were statistically significant,[51] but less than clinically important differences. There was a clinically important improvement in quality of life with mepolizumab.[51] All anti-IL5/5Rα biologics reduced blood eosinophils; almost completely with benralizumab.[52] In post hoc analyses, clinical outcomes with mepolizumab or benralizumab were similar in patients with and without an allergic phenotype.[53,54] In patients taking OCS, median OCS dose was able to be reduced by approximately 50% with mepolizumab[55] or benralizumab,[56] compared with placebo. In urban children aged 6 years and older with eosinophilic exacerbation-prone asthma, an RCT showed a reduction in the number of exacerbations with subcutaneous mepolizumab versus placebo.[57] No differences were seen in lung function, a composite asthma score (CASI), or physician–patient global assessment.[57] In patients with nasal polyps, mepolizumab improved subjective and objective outcomes and reduced the need for surgery,[58,59] and in patients with nasal polyps and severe eosinophilic asthma, benralizumab improved subjective outcomes for both conditions and improved quality of life.[60] For more details about treatment of nasal polyps, see GINA 2024 Strategy Report page 120.

Potential predictors of good asthma response to anti-IL5 or anti-IL5R:

- Higher blood eosinophils (strongly predictive)[61]
- Higher number of severe exacerbations in previous year (strongly predictive)[61]
- Adult-onset asthma[62]
- Nasal polyps[54]
- Maintenance OCS at baseline[54]
- Low lung function (FEV_1 <65% predicted in one study).[63]

Adverse effects: In adults, injection site reactions, anaphylaxis rare, adverse events generally similar between active and placebo. In children, more skin/subcutaneous tissue and nervous system disorders (e.g., headache, dizziness, syncope) were seen with mepolizumab than placebo.[57] In adults, long-term safety and efficacy of mepolizumab and benralizumab have been reported over up to 5 years of treatment.[64,65]

Suggested initial trial: at least 4 months

→ *Add-on anti-IL4Rα for severe eosinophilic/Type 2 asthma or patients requiring maintenance OCS*

Regulatory approvals may include: For ages ≥12 years: dupilumab (anti-IL4 receptor α), 200 mg or 300 mg by SC injection every 2 weeks for severe eosinophilic/Type 2 asthma; 300 mg by SC injection every 2 weeks for OCS-dependent severe asthma or if there is concomitant moderate/severe atopic dermatitis. For children 6–11 years with severe eosinophilic/Type 2 asthma by SC injection with dose and frequency depending on weight. May also be indicated for treatment of skin conditions including moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis, chronic rhinosinusitis with nasal polyps and eosinophilic esophagitis. Self-administration may be an option. Check local regulatory and payer criteria, as they may differ from these.

Mechanism: binds to interleukin-4 (IL-4) receptor alpha, blocking both IL-4 and IL-13 signaling

Eligibility criteria (in addition to criteria for severe asthma): these may vary between payers or by age-group, but often include:

- More than a specified number of severe exacerbations in the last year, and
- Type 2 biomarkers above a specified level (e.g. blood eosinophils ≥150/µl and ≤1500/µl; or FeNO ≥25 ppb) OR requirement for maintenance OCS.

Outcomes: Meta-analysis of RCTs in patients with uncontrolled severe asthma (ACQ-5 ≥1.5) and at least one exacerbation in the last year: anti-IL4Rα led to 56% reduction in severe exacerbations; improvements in quality of life, symptom control and lung function were statistically significant,[66] but less than the clinically important differences. In a post hoc analysis, clinical outcomes were similar in patients with allergic and non-allergic phenotype at baseline.[67] In patients with OCS-dependent severe asthma, without minimum requirements for blood eosinophil count or FeNO, the

median reduction in OCS dose with anti-IL4Rα versus placebo was 50%.[68] Changes were maintained through 2 years of follow-up.[69] In children 6–11 years with eosinophilic/Type 2 asthma, dupilumab reduced severe exacerbation rate and increased lung function; children taking maintenance OCS were excluded.[70] In patients with chronic rhinosinusitis with nasal polyps, dupilumab reduced the size of nasal polyps, improved nasal symptoms and reduced the need for OCS or sinus surgery.[71,72] For more details about nasal polyps, see GINA 2024 Strategy Report page 120.

Potential predictors of good asthma response to dupilumab:

- Higher blood eosinophils (strongly predictive)[73]
- Higher FeNO (strongly predictive)[73]

Adverse effects: injection-site reactions; transient blood eosinophilia (occurs in 4–13% of patients); rare cases of eosinophilic granulomatosis with polyangiitis (EGPA) may be unmasked following reduction/cessation of OCS treatment on dupilumab. Anti-IL4Rα is not suggested for patients with baseline or historic blood eosinophils >1,500 cells/μL because of limited evidence (such patients were excluded from Phase III trials). In adults, safety and efficacy of dupilumab have been reported for up to 3 years of treatment.[74]

Suggested initial trial: at least 4 months

→ *Add-on anti-TSLP for severe asthma*

Regulatory approvals may include: For ages ≥12 years: tezepelumab (anti-TSLP), 210 mg by SC injection every 4 weeks. Self-administration may be an option. Check local regulatory and payer criteria, as they may differ from these.

Mechanism: tezepelumab binds circulating TSLP, a bronchial epithelial cell-derived alarmin implicated in multiple downstream processes involved in asthma pathophysiology.

Eligibility criteria (in addition to criteria for severe asthma): these vary between payers, but usually include:

- Severe exacerbations in the last year.

Anti-TSLP may also be considered in patients with no elevated Type 2 markers (See 7.1).

Outcomes: In two RCTs in severe asthma patients with severe exacerbations in the last year, anti-TSLP led to 30–70% reduction in severe exacerbations, and improved quality of life, lung function and symptom control, irrespective of allergic status.[75,76] There was a clear correlation between higher baseline blood eosinophils or FeNO and better clinical outcomes.[76] In patients taking maintenance OCS, anti-TSLP did not lead to a reduced OCS dose, compared with placebo.[77]

Potential predictors of good asthma response to anti-TSLP:

- Higher blood eosinophils (strongly predictive)
- Higher FeNO levels (strongly predictive)

Adverse effects: injection site reactions, anaphylaxis is rare, adverse events generally similar between active and placebo groups. In adults, safety and efficacy of tezepelumab have been reported over up to 2 years of treatment.[78]

Suggested initial trial: at least 4 months

→ *Review response to an initial trial of add-on Type 2 targeted therapy*

- At present, there are no well-defined criteria for a good response, but consider exacerbations, symptom control, lung function, side-effects, treatment intensity (including OCS dose), and patient satisfaction.
- If the response is unclear, consider extending the trial to 6–12 months.
- If there is no response, stop the biologic therapy, and consider switching to a trial of a different Type 2-targeted therapy, if available and the patient is eligible. Also consider the patient's biomarkers (interval and during exacerbations, if available), and response of any comorbid Type 2 conditions (atopic dermatitis, nasal polyps etc). Review response as above.

9 Review response and implications for treatment

Review response to add-on biologic therapy after 3–4 months, and every 3–6 months for ongoing care, including (Figure 5):

- Asthma: symptom control, both recent e.g., with validated tools such as Asthma Control Test (4 weeks) and Asthma Control Questionnaire (ACQ-5, 1 week), and over the whole period since last review; frequency and severity of exacerbations (including whether OCS were needed); lung function
- Any change in relevant Type 2 comorbidities, e.g., nasal polyps, atopic dermatitis
- Medications: treatment intensity, including courses of OCS and dose of any maintenance OCS, side-effects, affordability
- Patient satisfaction.

→ *If the patient has had a good response to Type 2 targeted therapy:*

Re-evaluate the need for each asthma medication every 3–6 months, but emphasize to patients and their primary care physician that they should not completely stop ICS-containing therapy. Base the order of reduction or cessation of add-on treatments on potential adverse effects, the observed benefit when the medication was started, patient risk factors, cost, and patient satisfaction. Minimizing the use of OCS is a very high priority.

After reducing/ceasing any medication, confirm asthma stability before making any further treatment changes.

For oral treatments, gradually decrease or stop OCS first, because of their significant adverse effects. Tapering of OCS in severe asthma may be supported by internet-based monitoring of symptom control and FeNO.[79] Monitor patients for risk of adrenal insufficiency by measuring morning serum cortisol, and provide patient and primary care physician with advice about the need for extra corticosteroid doses during injury, illness or surgery for up to 6 months after cessation of long-term OCS. Continue to assess for presence of osteoporosis, and review need for preventative strategies including bisphosphonates.[23]

If asthma remains well controlled, consider reducing or ceasing other therapies, based on the above considerations.

For inhaled treatments, consider ceasing add-on inhaled therapy such as LAMA before reducing ICS-LABA dose. Reduction in dose of ICS-containing therapy may be considered after asthma has been well controlled on biologic therapy for at least 3–6 months and stability has been confirmed after any other medication changes. However, do not completely stop ICS-containing therapy. Previous advice based on consensus was to continue at least medium-dose ICS-LABA. In an open-label study in patients with good symptom control on anti-IL5Rα, most of those randomized to MART with ICS formoterol were able to have their maintenance ICS-formoterol dose gradually reduced (and in some cases stopped, continuing as-needed-only ICS-formoterol) without exacerbations. However, patients who ceased maintenance ICS formoterol treatment demonstrated evidence of under-dosing with ICS, with reduction in lung function and increase in FeNO, suggesting that in patients with severe asthma, maintenance ICS-containing therapy should not be stopped completely.[80] Any reduction in ICS dose should be considered as a treatment trial, and the previous dose reinstated if deterioration occurs (see GINA 2024 Strategy Report Box 4-13). Patients should be reminded of the importance of continuing their maintenance ICS-containing treatment.

For biologic treatments, current consensus advice is that, generally, for a patient with a good response, a trial of withdrawal of the biologic should not be considered until after at least 12 months of treatment, and only if asthma remains well controlled on medium-dose ICS-containing therapy, and (for allergic asthma) there is no further exposure to a previous well-documented allergic trigger. There are few studies of cessation of biologic therapy,[81,82] in these studies, symptom control worsened and/or exacerbations recurred for many (but not all) patients after cessation of the biologic.

For example, in a double-blind randomized controlled trial, significantly more patients who stopped mepolizumab experienced a severe exacerbation within 12 months compared with those who continued treatment. In this study, there was a small increase in ACQ-5 but no significant difference in symptom control between groups.[83]

→ *If the patient has NOT had a good response to any Type 2 targeted therapy:*

Stop the biologic therapy

Review the basics for factors contributing to symptoms, exacerbations and poor quality of life (see Section 2): diagnosis/differential diagnosis, inhaler technique, adherence, modifiable risk factors and triggers including smoking and other environmental exposures at home or work, comorbidities including obesity, medication side-effects or drug interactions, socio-economic and mental health issues.

Consider additional investigations (if not already done): high resolution chest CT; induced sputum to confirm inflammatory phenotype, consider bronchoscopy for alternative or additional diagnoses; consider referral if available, including for diagnosis of alternative conditions.

Reassess treatment options (if not already done), such as:

- Add-on low-dose azithromycin[32,33] (adults only; first check sputum for atypical mycobacteria and check ECG for long QTc (and re-check after a month on treatment); consider potential for antibiotic resistance)
- As last resort, consider add-on low-dose maintenance OCS, but implement strategies such as alternate-day therapy; add bisphosphonates to minimize side-effects,[23] and alert patient to the need for additional corticosteroid therapy during illness or surgery.
- Consider bronchial thermoplasty (+ registry).

Stop ineffective add-on therapies, but do not completely stop ICS

10 Continue collaborative optimization of patient care

Ongoing management of a patient with severe asthma involves a collaboration between the patient, the primary care physician, specialist(s), and other health professionals, to optimize clinical outcomes and patient satisfaction.

Continue to review the patient every 3–6 months including:

- Clinical asthma measures (symptom control; exacerbations; lung function)
- Comorbidities
- The patient's risk factors for exacerbations
- Treatments (check inhaler technique and adherence; review need for add-on treatments; assess side-effects including of OCS; optimize comorbidity management and non-pharmacologic strategies)
- The patient's social and emotional needs.

The optimal frequency and location of review (primary care physician or specialist) will depend on the patient's asthma control, risk factors and comorbidities, and their confidence in self-management, and may depend on local payer requirements and availability of specialist physicians.

Communicate regularly with the family physician and other members of the health care team about:

- Outcome of review visits (as above)
- Patient concerns
- Action plan for worsening asthma or other risks
- Changes to medications (asthma and non-asthma); potential side-effects
- Indications and contact details for expedited review

Overview of asthma medications

For more details about medications, see the full GINA 2024 Strategy Report (**www.ginasthma.org**) and Product Information from manufacturers. Always check local eligibility criteria.

Medications for maintenance treatment (every day, medium or long term)

Inhaled corticosteroids (ICS)

Medications	Beclometasone, budesonide, ciclesonide, fluticasone propionate, fluticasone furoate, mometasone, triamcinolone
Delivery	Inhaled: pressurized metered-dose inhaler or dry-powder inhaler
Use in asthma	Medications that contain ICS are the most effective anti-inflammatory medications for asthma. ICSs reduce symptoms, increase lung function, reduce airway hyperresponsiveness, improve quality of life, and reduce the risk of exacerbations, asthma-related hospitalizations and death. Potency and bioavailability varies between ICSs. Most clinical benefit is achieved at low doses.
Adverse effects	Most patients do not experience side-effects. Local: oropharyngeal candidiasis, dysphonia. Risk of candidiasis reduced by rinsing mouth with water and spitting it out after inhaling. Systemic: osteoporosis, cataract, glaucoma. Risk increases with long-term use of high doses. Risk of some systemic adverse effects, such as adrenal suppression, may increase if patient uses medications that inhibit cytochrome P450 (for example, ketoconazole, ritonavir, itraconazole, erythromycin, clarithromycin).

ICS in combination with a long-acting beta$_2$-agonist bronchodilator (ICS-LABA)

Medications	Beclometasone-formoterol, budesonide-formoterol, fluticasone furoate-vilanterol, fluticasone propionate formoterol, fluticasone propionate-salmeterol, mometasone-formoterol, mometasone-indacaterol
Delivery	Inhaled: pressurized metered-dose inhaler or dry-powder inhaler
Use in asthma	When a low daily dose of ICS fails to achieve good control of asthma, addition of LABA to maintenance ICS improves symptoms, lung function and reduces exacerbations. ICS-LABA is more effective than doubling the dose of ICS. Two regimens are available: 1. Maintenance-and-reliever therapy (MART): combination of low-dose beclometasone or budesonide with low-dose formoterol used for both maintenance and reliever treatment (see Anti-inflammatory reliever medications, below) 2. ICS-LABA as maintenance treatment, plus SABA (or ICS-SABA) as reliever. For adults and adolescents, MART is preferred (GINA Track 1; see GINA 2024 Strategy Report) because it reduces exacerbations compared with ICS-LABA maintenance plus as-needed SABA reliever, and is simpler.
Adverse effects	LABA: tachycardia, headache, muscle cramps. LABA should not be used without ICS in patients with asthma (or asthma+COPD). ICS: See Inhaled corticosteroids (above)

Leukotriene receptor antagonists (LTRA) and leukotriene modifiers (LM)

Medications	Montelukast, pranlukast, zafirlukast, zileuton
Delivery	Oral: tablets
Use in asthma	Target one part of the inflammatory pathway in asthma. Sometimes used as maintenance therapy, mainly in children. LTRA is less effective than low-dose ICS. ICS plus LTRA is less effective than ICS-LABA.
Adverse effects	Zileuton and zafirlukast: elevated liver function tests Montelukast: concerns about risk of serious behavioral and mood changes, including suicidal ideation in adults and children – discuss with patients/parents/caregivers

Add-on maintenance medications

Long-acting muscarinic antagonists (LAMA) – check local eligibility criteria

Medications	Patients aged ≥6 years: tiotropium by mist inhaler, in addition to ICS-LABA treatment Patients aged ≥18 years: combination ICS-LABA-LAMA inhalers (beclometasone-formoterol-glycopyrronium, fluticasone furoate-vilanterol-umeclidinium, mometasone-indacaterol-glycopyrronium)
Delivery	Inhaled: pressurized metered-dose inhaler, dry-powder inhaler, or mist inhaler
Use in asthma	Can be added to other treatment for patients with uncontrolled asthma despite ICS-LABA. Consider adding at Step 5 (or Step 4, but weaker evidence for benefit). See GINA 2024 Strategy Report for GINA treatment steps. Adding LAMA to ICS-LABA improves lung function by a small amount (but not symptoms or quality of life), and reduces exacerbations by a small amount. For patients with exacerbations, increase ICS to at least medium dose before adding a LAMA.
Adverse effects	Uncommon: dry mouth, urinary retention

Anti-immunoglobin E – check local eligibility criteria

Medications	Patients aged ≥6 years: omalizumab
Delivery	Subcutaneous injection: syringe or pen device (self-injection may be an option)
Use in asthma	Can be added to other treatment for patients with severe allergic asthma uncontrolled on high-dose ICS-LABA (see local product information for other indications)
Adverse effects	Common: minor reactions at injection site Rare: anaphylaxis

Anti-interleukin 5 and anti-interleukin 5 receptor alpha – check local eligibility criteria

Medications	Patients aged ≥6 years: mepolizumab Patients aged ≥ 12 years: benralizumab Patients aged ≥18 years: reslizumab
Delivery	Subcutaneous injection: mepolizumab, benralizumab (self-injection may be an option) Intravenous infusion: reslizumab
Use in asthma	Can be added to other treatment for patients with severe eosinophilic asthma uncontrolled on high-dose ICS-LABA (see local product information for other indications). Maintenance oral corticosteroid dose can be significantly reduced with benralizumab and mepolizumab.
Adverse effects	Common: headache, minor reactions at injection site

Anti-interleukin 4 receptor alpha – check local eligibility criteria

Medications	Patients aged ≥6 years: dupilumab
Delivery	Subcutaneous injection: syringe or pen device (self-injection may be an option)
Use in asthma	Can be added to other treatment for patients with severe eosinophilic asthma or Type 2 airway inflammation, if asthma uncontrolled on high-dose ICS-LABA, or patients requiring maintenance oral corticosteroids (see local product information for other indications). Not advised for patients with current or past blood eosinophils ≥1500/μL.
Adverse effects	Common: minor reactions at injection site Uncommon: transient blood eosinophilia (4–13% of patients) Rare: eosinophilic granulomatosis with polyangiitis after reducing or stopping oral corticosteroids while on dupilumab

Anti-thymic stromal lymphopoietin – check local eligibility criteria

Medications	Patients aged ≥12 years: tezepelumab
Delivery	Subcutaneous injection: syringe or pen device self-injection may be an option
Use in asthma	Can be added to other treatment for patients with severe asthma that is uncontrolled on high-dose ICS-LABA
Adverse effects	Common: minor reactions at injection site Rare: anaphylaxis

Systemic corticosteroids

Medications	Prednisone, prednisolone, methylprednisolone, hydrocortisone, dexamethasone
Delivery	Oral (tablets or liquid), intramuscular injection, or intravenous injection
Use in asthma	Short-term use for severe acute exacerbations: effective for preventing short-term recurrence of severe asthma exacerbations. Treatment usually oral 5–7 days in adults, 3–5 days in children. If used for >2 weeks, reduce dose gradually before stopping. Long-term use: avoid due to risk of serious adverse effects, except as a last resort, and only if asthma cannot be controlled by other treatments. Check and manage adverse effects. Refer patient for specialist review.
Adverse effects	Short courses: sepsis, thromboembolism, sleep disturbance, gastroesophageal reflux, increased appetite, hyperglycemia, mood changes. Multiple short courses increase later risk of diabetes, osteoporosis, cataract, glaucoma, heart failure and other conditions. Maintenance use: adverse effects include cataract, glaucoma, hypertension, diabetes, adrenal suppression osteoporosis

Anti-inflammatory reliever medications

Low-dose combination ICS-formoterol

Medications	Beclometasone-formoterol or budesonide-formoterol
Delivery	Inhaled: pressurized metered-dose inhaler or dry-powder inhaler
Use in asthma	Used as reliever (without maintenance treatment) for adults and adolescents at GINA Track 1 Steps 1–2, instead of SABA. Reduces emergency visits/hospitalizations by 65% compared with SABA alone, and by 37% compared with daily ICS plus as-needed SABA. Used as the reliever for patients prescribed maintenance-and-reliever therapy with ICS-formoterol (adults and adolescents at GINA Track 1 Steps 3–5, children 6–11 at GINA Steps 3–5). Reduces the risk of severe exacerbations, compared with using SABA as reliever, with similar symptom control. Can be used before exercise to prevent exercise-induced bronchoconstriction. Can be used before or during allergen exposure to prevent and relieve asthma symptoms.
Adverse effects	See: ICS in combination with long-acting beta$_2$ agonist bronchodilator (ICS-LABA), above

Low-dose combination ICS-SABA

Medications	Budesonide-salbutamol (albuterol), beclometasone-salbutamol
Delivery	Inhaled: pressurized metered-dose inhaler or dry-powder inhaler
Use in asthma	Reliever (instead of SABA) for adults and adolescents in GINA Track 2. Maximum 6 doses, each of 2 inhalations of 80 mcg budesonide with 90 mcg albuterol, in any day. Cannot be used for maintenance-and-reliever therapy. There are no studies of as-needed-only use of budesonide-salbutamol in Steps 1–2 (see GINA 2024 Strategy Report) Not recommended for children
Adverse effects	See: Inhaled corticosteroids (ICS), above Short-acting inhaled beta$_2$ agonist bronchodilators (SABA), below

Short-acting bronchodilator reliever medications

Short-acting inhaled beta$_2$ agonist bronchodilators (SABA)

Medications	Salbutamol (albuterol), terbutaline
Delivery	Inhaled: pressurized metered-dose inhaler or dry-powder inhaler (also solution for nebulization or injection)
Use in asthma	Quick relief of asthma symptoms and bronchoconstriction, and for pretreatment before exercise. SABAs should be used only when needed (not regularly) at the dose needed to relieve symptoms. Use without ICS not recommended due to risk of severe exacerbations and asthma-related death. Commonly used for severe exacerbations in primary care and emergency departments.
Adverse effects	Short-term: tremor, tachycardia with initial use Regular and frequent use: tolerance results increased airway hyperresponsiveness, reduced bronchodilator effect, and increased airway inflammation. Excess use, or poor response, indicates poor asthma control and risk of exacerbations. Dispensing of 3 or more 200-dose canisters per year is associated with increased risk of exacerbations, and dispensing of 12 or more canisters per year is associated with markedly increased risk of death.

Short-acting antimuscarinic antagonists (anticholinergics)

Medications	Ipratropium bromide, oxitropium bromide May be in combination inhaler with SABA
Delivery	Inhaled: pressurized metered-dose inhaler or dry-powder inhaler (also solution for nebulization)
Use in asthma	Short-term use in acute care for severe exacerbations: ipratropium plus SABA reduces risk of hospital admission acute asthma, compared with SABA alone As-needed use as reliever: less effective than SABA, with slower onset of action
Adverse effects	Dry mouth, bitter taste. Should be used with caution in patients with narrow-angle glaucoma

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Global Strategy for Asthma Management and Prevention (2024). This report provides an integrated approach to asthma that can be adapted for a wide range of health systems. The report has a user-friendly format with many practical summary tables and flow-charts for use in clinical practice. It is updated yearly. Available at **www.ginasthma.org**.

Pocket Guide for asthma management and prevention for adults and children older than 5 years (2024). Summary for primary health care providers, to be used in conjunction with the main GINA report. Available at **www.ginasthma.org**.

What's new in 2024 (slide set). Available at **www.ginasthma.org**.

Reddel HK, Bateman ED, Schatz M, Krishnan JA, Cloutier MM. A Practical Guide to Implementing SMART in Asthma Management. J Allergy Clin Immunol Pract. 2022 Jan;10(1S):S31-S38.

Other resources for severe asthma

Severe asthma toolkit – Australian Centre of Excellence in Severe Asthma https://toolkit.severeasthma.org.au

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