

What is asthma?



Asthma is a chronic inflammatory disorder of the airways. The airways of people with asthma are extra sensitive to things that they're allergic to (called allergens) and to other things in the air that can cause irritation. Although

asthma is a chronic disease (meaning it is present at all times), people who have it can also have attacks when airways suddenly narrow.

Who gets asthma?

Anyone can get asthma. In fact, asthma is a growing health problem in the United States. Most asthma begins in childhood, although some people develop it as an adult.

What are the symptoms?

Asthma symptoms include:

- Cough
- Shortness of breath
- Wheezing
- Feeling of tightness in the chest

If you think you have asthma, you should talk with a doctor about symptom patterns, including whether symptoms are more frequent during the spring or fall (allergy seasons), and whether exercise, a respiratory infection, or exposure to cold air has ever triggered an attack. This information will help the doctor make a diagnosis.

What can trigger an asthma attack?

Specific irritants or “triggers” can cause an asthma attack.

Common Triggers of Asthma Attacks

- Air pollution
- Aspirin, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, and others like ibuprofen
- Changes in temperature
- Dust
- Exercise
- Heartburn
- Mold
- Perfume
- Pets
- Pollen
- Sinus infections
- Some foods
- Spray-on deodorants
- Strong emotions
- Sulfite (food preservative in red wine, beer, salad bars, dehydrated soups and other foods)
- Tobacco smoke
- Viruses

Can asthma be controlled?

Yes. Avoiding or controlling asthma attacks is as important as taking your medication. Because there are so many things that can trigger allergic responses, identifying and avoiding the allergens is hard. There are some simple steps to avoid the most obvious and common allergens:

- Stay away from known airway irritants as much as possible.
- Reduce allergens in the home, especially the bedroom, by careful weekly cleaning.
- Use special covers for pillows and mattresses if dust mite allergies exist. Washing all bedding weekly in hot water kills dust mites that can trigger attacks.

- Vacuum carpets once or twice every week. Bare floors are easier to keep clean.
- Keep indoor humidity low to reduce problems with mold and dust mites.

What is a peak flow meter?

A peak flow meter is a hand-held device that measures how fast you can blow air out of your lungs. When asthma flares up, airways in the lungs begin to narrow. If you regularly use a peak flow meter, it can tell you the airways are narrowing, hours – or even days – before any symptoms appear.

Based on the results of the peak flow test, a doctor may adjust medications or schedules before symptoms appear. This may stop the episode quickly and prevent more severe symptoms. The peak flow meter can also help determine:

- What makes the asthma worse
- If a treatment plan is working well
- When to add or stop medicine
- When emergency care is needed

If you are not using a peak flow meter, talk to your doctor.

Are medications needed to treat asthma?

People with asthma generally require medication to help control symptoms. Each person has different medication needs. That's why it's important to talk with your doctor. If medications are prescribed, don't stop taking them unless told to do so by your doctor. Otherwise, a dangerous asthma attack could occur.

Medications used for asthma treatment include those that control the asthma and those used to provide quick relief during an attack. Because asthma affects people differently, the types of medications used and how often to take them should be discussed with your doctor.

Is there a cure for asthma?

Currently there is no cure for asthma. However, good self-care can help control asthma.

Tips for Controlling Asthma

- Learn the basic facts about asthma
- Use proper medications, including control medications, regularly
- Control asthma attacks by avoiding “triggers” as much as possible
- Eat well
- Exercise
- Stop smoking

All of these can dramatically help decrease symptoms and allow many people with asthma to lead active lives.



People with asthma can lead active lives.

Other Resources

- **American Lung Association**
1740 Broadway
New York, NY 10019
212.315.8700
www.lungusa.org
- **NIH Exhibition**
www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/breath/breathhome.html

This material provides general information to help you better understand asthma. Because asthma affects people differently, it's important to keep in contact with your doctor if you have asthma or have specific questions about asthma. This information should not replace anything your doctor has told you. Instead, it should help you feel more comfortable talking with your doctor about asthma. Talking to your doctor will help both of you make the best possible decisions about your health care.



WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT

Asthma

