



Asthma

Fact:

No one knows what causes asthma, but we know what triggers many attacks.

Fiction:

It's a myth that you shouldn't exercise if you have asthma.

Prevention:

Avoiding allergens may help prevent attacks.

Treatment:

Asthma cannot be cured, but can usually be controlled.

Most people take breathing for granted, but asthma can cause a frightening struggle to breathe.

Understanding Asthma

Asthma, a chronic condition of the lungs, makes breathing difficult by:

- Inflaming the air passages (the bronchial tubes)
- Constricting the muscles around the airways
- Clogging the passageways with mucus

Difficulty breathing can be mild and occasional to nearly constant and life threatening.

Who Has Asthma?

Asthma can begin at any age. Some 25 million people have asthma; one-third of those are children.* For half of affected children, symptoms improve or even disappear with age. Asthma strikes more often in people with personal or family histories of allergies.

Symptoms of Asthma

Asthma symptoms include:

- A whistling, wheezing sound on breathing out
- A struggle to breathe
- Chest tightness
- Persistent cough

Some people have few or no symptoms between asthma attacks. An attack can be signaled by shortness of breath, more coughing or mucus, a sinus headache or fever and symptoms that mimic a cold or flu.**

When It's an Emergency

Seek immediate emergency care if the following do not respond to your usual medication:

- A rapid pulse
- Sweating

- Flared nostrils
- Extreme shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, walking or talking
- Using the chest and neck muscles in breathing
- A bluish discoloration of the lips and fingernails
- Decreasing peak airflow as measured by a handheld meter

Prevention

Be sure to develop an asthma treatment plan with your doctor, and follow the plan. It may call for maintenance levels of medication. If so, be sure to take the medication.

Many, but not all, people with asthma have identifiable triggers that can bring on an attack. If triggers can be identified, avoid them. Allergy testing may help to identify sensitivities. Triggers include:

- Allergens (things to which a person is allergic) such as animals, pollens and molds, dust mites and cockroaches, medications and foods
- Cigarette smoke and other environmental pollutants
- Cleaning supplies, perfume, paint and other strong smells
- Stress
- Dehydration, which thickens mucus
- Cold air

For allergy sufferers, the following may help:

- Special furnace and vacuum cleaner filters
- Encasing pillows and mattresses in airtight enclosures
- Removing draperies, rugs and bedspreads from sleeping areas
- Staying indoors and using air conditioning during pollen season
- Keeping your living area clean
- Wearing a mask when cleaning, painting, or being around smoke

Watch out for viral infections. Adults with asthma should get a flu shot each year.

If asthma is triggered by exercise, start slowly and warm up. An attack may be prevented by breathing warm, humidified air before and during exercise and by using an inhaler. If exercising in cold, dry air, a scarf may be worn over the mouth.

Many people successfully prevent attacks with stress reduction techniques such as breathing exercises, biofeedback, hypnosis, journaling, meditation or prayer. Acupuncture and acupressure also may prove helpful.

Treatment

At the onset of an attack, follow a doctor's directions. A handheld peak-flow meter can be used to measure airflow. If medical care is sought, tests may be given to measure the level of oxygen in your blood.

Severe attacks require hospital treatment so that oxygen can be given as well as drugs by vein or nebulizer. Intubation may be required (a breathing tube inserted in the large airway) and artificial ventilation in an intensive care unit.

Remember, don't use an inhaler more often each day than recommended by a doctor. By temporarily relieving symptoms with an inhaler, you may postpone needed treatment, including a change in medication or dose. There is also a risk of drugs reaching toxic levels.

* American Lung Association

** IntelliHealth

