

ASTHMA OVERVIEW

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Asthma Overview

What is asthma?

Asthma is a chronic disease that affects the airways of the lungs. During normal breathing, the bands of muscle that surround the airways are relaxed and air moves freely. During an asthma episode or “attack,” there are three main changes that stop air from moving easily through the airways:

- The bands of muscle that surround the airways tighten and make the airways narrow. This tightening is called bronchospasm.
- The lining of the airways becomes swollen or inflamed.
- The cells that line the airways produce more mucus, which is thicker than normal.

These three factors - bronchospasm, inflammation, and mucus production - cause symptoms such as difficulty breathing, wheezing and coughing.

What are the most common symptoms of asthma?

Asthma symptoms are not the same for everyone. They can even change from episode to episode in the same person. Also, you may have only one symptom of asthma, such as cough, but another person may have all the symptoms of asthma. It is important to know all the symptoms of asthma and to be aware that your asthma can present in any of these ways at any time.

The most common symptoms include:

- Coughing, especially at night
- Shortness of breath

- Wheezing
- Chest tightness, pain, or pressure

Who is affected by asthma?

People who have a family history of asthma have an increased risk of developing the disease. Asthma is also more common in people who have allergies or who are exposed to tobacco smoke. However, anyone can develop asthma at any time. Some people may have asthma all of their lives, while others may develop it as adults.

What causes asthma?

The airways in a person with asthma are very sensitive and react to many things, or “triggers.” Contact with these triggers causes asthma symptoms. One of the most important parts of asthma control is to identify your triggers and then avoid them when possible. The only trigger you do not want to avoid is exercise. Pre-treatment with medicines before exercise can allow you to stay active yet avoid asthma symptoms.

Common asthma triggers include:

- Infections (colds, viruses, flu, sinus infections)
- Exercise
- Weather (changes in temperature and/or humidity, cold air)
- Tobacco smoke
- Allergens (dust mites, pollens, pets, mold spores, cockroaches, and sometimes foods)
- Irritants (strong odors from cleaning products, perfume, wood smoke, air pollution)
- Strong emotions such as crying or laughing hard
- Some medications

How is asthma diagnosed?

To diagnose asthma, your doctor will first review your medical history, family history, and symptoms. Your doctor will want to know any past history of breathing problems you may have had, as well as a family history of asthma, allergies, eczema (a bumpy, itchy skin rash caused by allergies), or other lung diseases. It is important that you describe your symptoms in detail (cough, wheeze, shortness of breath, chest tightness), including when and how often they occur.

The doctor will perform a physical examination and listen to your heart and lungs. He or she may also order breathing tests, allergy tests, blood tests, and chest and sinus X-rays. The tests will find out if you do have asthma and if there are any other conditions that are contributing factors.

How is asthma treated?

Asthma can be controlled, but not cured. It is not normal to have frequent symptoms, trouble sleeping, or trouble completing tasks. Appropriate asthma care will prevent symptoms and visits to the emergency room and hospital. Asthma medicines are one of the mainstays of asthma treatment. The drugs used to treat asthma are explained below.

Anti-inflammatories: These are the most important drugs for most people with asthma. Anti-inflammatory drugs reduce swelling and mucus production in the airways. As a result, airways are less sensitive and less likely to react to triggers. These medications need to be taken daily and may need to be taken for several weeks before they begin to control asthma. Anti-inflammatory medicines lead to fewer symptoms, better airflow, less sensitive airways, less airway damage, and fewer asthma attacks. If taken every day, they CONTROL or prevent asthma symptoms.

Bronchodilators: These drugs relax the muscle bands that tighten around the airways. This action opens the airways, letting more air in and out of the lungs and improving breathing. Bronchodilators also help clear mucus from the lungs. As the airways open, the mucus moves more freely and can be coughed out more easily. In short-acting forms, bronchodilators RELIEVE or stop asthma symptoms by quickly opening the airways and are very helpful during an asthma episode. In long-acting forms, bronchodilators provide CONTROL of asthma symptoms and prevent asthma episodes.

Asthma drugs can be taken in a variety of ways. Inhaling the medications—by using a metered dose inhaler, dry powder inhaler, or nebulizer—is one way of taking asthma medicines. Oral medicines (pills or liquids you swallow) may also be prescribed.

Asthma Severity

Asthma is classified as either “intermittent” (comes and goes) or “persistent” (lasting). Persistent asthma is further described as being mild, moderate, or severe. The severity of asthma is based on how often you have symptoms both during the day and night, as well as by the results of lung function tests and by how well you can perform activities. The “severity” of asthma refers to how “intense” or “strong” your asthma is.

Asthma Control

Asthma control is the goal of asthma treatment. Regardless of your asthma severity, it may or may not be controlled. Asthma control means:

- You are able to do everything you want to do at work and home
- You have no (or minimal) asthma symptoms
- You do not wake up from your sleep or earlier than usual in the morning due to asthma
- You rarely need to use your reliever medicine (inhaler)

Another major part of your treatment is that you are happy with your asthma care and believe your asthma is controlled.

Monitoring Symptoms

A key part of treatment is keeping track of how well your lungs are working. Monitoring your symptoms - what they are, how and when they happen, and how severe they are - is an important part of being able to control your asthma.

Sometimes asthma is monitored using a peak flow meter. A peak flow (PF) meter measures how fast the air comes out of your lungs. It can help you know when your asthma is getting worse, sometimes even before you have symptoms. By taking daily peak flow readings, you can learn

when to adjust medications to keep asthma under good control. Your doctor can also use this information to adjust your treatment plan.

Asthma action plan

Based on your history and asthma severity, you and your doctor will develop a care plan called an asthma action plan. The asthma action plan describes when and how to use your medicines, actions to take when asthma worsens, and when to seek emergency care. Make sure you understand this plan; if not, ask your asthma care provider any questions you may have.

Your asthma action plan is one of the keys to controlling asthma. Keep it readily available to remind you of what you need to do every day to control asthma and what you need to do when symptoms occur.

Goals Of Asthma Therapy

These are the goals of asthma treatment:

- Live an active, normal life
- Prevent chronic and troublesome symptoms
- Attend work or school every day
- Perform daily activities without difficulty
- Stop urgent visits to the doctor, emergency room, or hospital
- Use and adjust medications to control asthma with few or no side effects

If you are unable to reach all of these goals, your asthma is not under control. You should contact your asthma care provider for advice.

By learning about asthma and how it can be controlled, you take an important step toward managing this disease. Work closely with your asthma care team to learn all you can about your asthma, how to avoid triggers, what your medications do, and how to take them correctly. With proper care, you can live free of asthma symptoms and maintain a normal, healthy lifestyle.

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