

Understanding Asthma

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Asthma is a lifelong lung condition that makes the lining of the airways become swollen, inflamed, and produce more mucus. Because of this, the airways become tighter and narrower, which is called “bronchoconstriction.” This can make it hard to breathe and can cause asthma symptoms. Asthma symptoms include: shortness of breath, tightness in the chest and wheezing or coughing.

Causes of asthma

- Asthma is a very common condition in all age groups.
- The cause of asthma is not known but it does run in families.
- Asthma cannot be cured but, with the right education and treatment, it can be well-controlled.
- Asthma symptoms are caused by the inflammation (swelling) and constriction (narrowing) of the airways. A trigger is something that causes an asthma attack. Asthma symptoms are caused by a person being sensitive to “triggers.”
 - Triggers can make the airway irritated.
 - Everyone has different asthma triggers. People with asthma have super-sensitive airways that can make them react to different triggers.
 - Asthma triggers include: cigarette smoke, pollen, infections, and cold air.

During an asthma attack:

- The main symptoms of asthma include: shortness of breath, wheezing, tightness in the chest, cough, increased mucus, and fatigue. Not everyone with asthma wheezes. Some people only cough.
- The airways become swollen and the muscles around the airways tighten, making the airways narrower. This “bronchoconstriction” makes it hard for the air to move in and out of the lungs. More mucus also makes it harder to breathe by plugging up the airways. Wheezing and coughing happen because air is being forced through smaller airways. The more asthma episodes you have, the more swollen your airways become. This causes more asthma attacks. It is important to treat both the airway (bronchiole) inflammation and the airway tightening (bronchoconstriction).
- Asthma attacks can happen at any time, but they often happen at night or after exercise. Attacks can be short or last for many days.
 - For some people asthma is bad at night. This is called nighttime or nocturnal asthma. With the right treatment, these symptoms can be controlled so that you can get a full night’s rest.
 - For some people asthma is bad during or after exercise. This is called exercise-induced asthma. A lot of the time these people will not have asthma symptoms at other times. Warming up and taking medicines 10-15 minutes before exercise can help with this type of asthma.

Managing asthma

- The most important thing you can do to have a normal life is to control your asthma. Since asthma is a life-long inflammatory disease, asthma medicines not only help with acute asthma attacks but also help with stopping future asthma attacks.
- Asthma symptoms can also be lessened and stopped by limiting your contact with triggers.
- The goals of treating asthma are:
 - Stop the chronic symptoms, including nighttime symptoms
 - Prevent asthma attacks
 - Prevent emergency room visits or hospitalizations for asthma
 - Keep lung function as close to normal as possible
 - Avoid side effects from medicines used to treat asthma
 - NO limitations on daily activities, including exercise

Developing a partnership with your doctor, pharmacist, and nurse

Although asthma cannot be cured, there are many ways to control your asthma symptoms. You should talk “openly” about the how well your medicine works and any possible side effects that you may have. Your doctor, pharmacist and nurse will work with you to make a treatment plan that is the best for you.

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