



ASTHMA

What is asthma?

Asthma is a lung condition that causes wheezing, coughing, and shortness of breath. It is caused by inflammation (swelling) of the lining of the airways in your lungs. Asthma is a chronic condition, which means that wheezing, coughing and trouble breathing could occur off and on for the rest of your life. Some people have coughing or wheezing only during or after physical activity. This is called exercise-induced asthma. Most asthma is triggered by substances in the environment (allergens).

Asthma may be mild, moderate, or severe. An asthma attack may last a few minutes or for days. Attacks can happen anywhere and at any time. Severe asthma attacks can cause death. It is very important to get treatment for asthma so you can live a healthy, active life.

How does it occur?

If you have asthma, the airways in your lungs are always somewhat inflamed, even when you do not have any symptoms. When your airways are exposed to irritants or allergens, the airways become more swollen and begin to make excess mucus. The muscles in the walls of the airways begin to tighten. These reactions cause the airway openings to become smaller, making it harder for air to move in and out. Wheezing is the sound of air moving through the narrowed air passages. The extra mucus and irritation in the airways causes coughing.

Often asthma attacks are triggered by common environmental factors and situations. These typically fall into three groups:

- **Allergens** make up the largest group of triggers. Pollen, animal dander, mold, mildew, cockroaches and dust are common airborne triggers.
- **Irritants** include cigarette smoke and residues, perfumes, household cleaning products, aerosol sprays, smoke, industrial chemicals, and air pollution.
- **Physical condition** such as viral infections, colds, or flu can cause flare-ups. Exercise, weather changes, cold air, and emotional stress are other triggers in this category.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of asthma are:

- Wheezing
- Coughing
- Shortness of breath
- Feeling of chest tightness

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about previous and current breathing problems and will do a physical exam. You may have one or more breathing tests. You may be tested before and after taking medication to measure your response to medication.

A single attack of wheezing does not necessarily mean that you have asthma. Certain infections and some chemicals can cause wheezing that lasts for a short time and then does not occur again. Before deciding whether you have asthma, your provider may want to see if you have another attack of wheezing.

How can I take care of myself?

Since asthma is a lifelong condition, prevention of attacks is an important way to take care of yourself. Depending on your specific allergies, these guidelines may help keep allergens and irritants out of your home.

- Avoid cigarette smoke.
- Cover mattresses, box springs and pillows with zippered, hypoallergenic, barrier covers.
- Wash bedding in hot water once a week.
- Wash and thoroughly dry pillows once a month.
- Avoid using a vaporizer or humidifier unless it is regularly and thoroughly cleaned to remove mold. Only use if actively sick or clinical recommendation.
- It is best to not have pets. If you do have a pet, bathe your pet weekly, vacuum frequently and thoroughly, and use a HEPA (high efficiency particulate arresting) air filter in your child's bedroom. This should be a "No Pet Zone."
- Stay indoors when the humidity or pollen count is high.
- Use air conditioning instead of open windows to cool your home. Use a good home filter.
- Do not use attic fans.
- Avoid vapors from harsh chemicals, such as bleach.

You should also:

- Take your medications exactly as prescribed.
- Get a flu vaccine every Autumn.
- Learn as much as possible about asthma.

Asthma can be a life-threatening condition. If your medicines do not seem to be working to keep you breathing comfortably, contact your healthcare provider. If you are having an asthma attack and your albuterol inhaler has not relieved your symptoms, you must get medical care right away. This may mean going to the emergency room or calling 911.

Medicines

Asthma medications come in two types: controllers and relievers.

Controllers – These are used to control the symptoms of asthma and minimize the asthma problems.

- Inhaled Steroids (Flovent, Pulmicort, Beclovent, Aerobid, Azmacort, QVAR) are the most important and appropriate medicines for control of persistent asthma.
- Long-acting Beta-agonists (Serevent)
- Leukotriene Antagonists (Accolate, Singulair, Zyflo)

Relievers – These are to be used during attacks or as directed by your doctor only. The risk of a very serious episode due to asthma has been linked to overuse of relievers.

- Short-acting Beta-antagonists (Albuterol, Proventil, Ventolin, Xopenex, Maxair, Alupent) are the most commonly prescribed relievers.
- Anticholinergic agents (Atrovent) are uncommonly used.

On occasion, for severe attacks, steroids by mouth may be indicated.

It is very important to use the controller medicine as directed and minimize need for reliever medicines. If you are having an increased need to use your relievers, it is important to see your doctor and consider need for further management.

How long will the effects of asthma last?

Asthma is a chronic condition, even though you might not have any symptoms for decades. Asthma is more common in children than adults. People who had asthma as children often have no symptoms once they become adults, but the symptoms can return later in life. Asthma that develops for the first time in mid-life or later usually continues to be a problem for the rest of your life. It can be managed so that you can live a normal life.

You can learn more about asthma by checking out the links on our website www.springdalemasonpediatrics.com. 9/25/18.