



Asthma Information for Staywell Members

What Is Asthma?

Asthma causes swelling in the airways that lead to your lungs. When asthma flares up, the airways tighten and become narrower. This keeps the air from passing through easily and makes it hard for you to breathe. These flare-ups are also called asthma attacks. Asthma affects people in different ways. Some people only have asthma attacks during allergy season. Others have them when they breathe in cold air, or when they exercise. Some have many bad attacks that send them to the doctor often.

Even if you have few asthma attacks, you still need to treat your asthma. It can lead to permanent changes in your airways and harm your lungs. But many people with asthma live active, full lives. Although it is a lifelong disease, treatment can control it and keep you healthy.

What Causes Asthma?

Experts do not know just what causes asthma. But there are some things we do know:

- Asthma runs in families.
- Asthma is much more common in people with allergies, though not everyone with allergies gets asthma. And not everyone with asthma has allergies.
- Pollution may cause asthma or make it worse.

What Are the Symptoms?

Symptoms of asthma can be mild or severe. You may have mild attacks now and then. You may have severe symptoms every day. Or you may have something in between. How often you have symptoms can also change. When you have asthma, you may:

- Wheeze, making a loud or soft whistling noise that occurs when you breathe in and out.
- Cough a lot.
- Feel tightness in your chest.
- Feel short of breath.
- Have trouble sleeping because of coughing or having a hard time breathing.
- Quickly get tired during exercise.

Your symptoms may be worse at night. Severe asthma attacks can be serious and call for emergency treatment.

How Is Asthma Diagnosed?

Your doctor will do a physical exam and ask you about your health. Your doctor may also order lung function tests. These tests include:

- Spirometry. Doctors use this test to diagnose and keep track of asthma. It measures how quickly you can move air in and out of your lungs and how much air you move.
- Peak expiratory flow (PEF). This shows how fast you can breathe out when you try your hardest.
- An exercise or inhalation challenge. This test measures how quickly you can breathe after exercise or after taking a medicine.
- A chest X-ray, to see if something else is causing your symptoms.
- Allergy tests, if your doctor thinks your symptoms may be caused by allergies. You will need routine checkups to keep track of your asthma and decide on treatment.

How Is it Treated?

There are two parts to treating asthma. The goals are to:

- Control it over the long term. To do this, use a daily asthma treatment plan. This is a written plan that tells you

which medicine to take. It also helps you track your symptoms and know how well the treatment is working. Many people take controller medicine every day. This is usually an inhaled corticosteroid. Taking this kind of medicine every day helps to reduce the swelling of the airways and prevent attacks. Your doctor will show you how to use your inhaler correctly. This is very important so you get the right amount of medicine to help you breathe better.

- Treat asthma attacks when they occur. Use an asthma action plan. This plan tells you what to do when you have an asthma attack. It also helps you identify those things that can cause your attacks. You use rescue medicine, such as albuterol, during an attack.

If you need to use the rescue inhaler more often than usual, talk to your doctor. This is a sign that your asthma is not controlled and can cause problems. Asthma attacks can be serious, but you may be able to stop them if you follow a plan. Your doctor can teach you how to follow your treatment and action plans.

How Can You Prevent Asthma Attacks?

You can prevent some attacks by avoiding those things that cause them. These are called triggers. A trigger can be:

- Irritants in the air, such as cigarette smoke or other air pollution. Don't smoke. And try to avoid being around others when they smoke.
- Things you are allergic to, such as pet dander, dust mites, cockroaches or pollen. When you can, avoid those things you are allergic to. It may also help to take certain kinds of allergy medicine.
- Exercise. Ask your doctor about using an inhaler before you exercise if this is a trigger for you.
- Other things like dry, cold air; an infection; or some medicines, such as aspirin. Try not to exercise outside when it is cold and dry. Talk to your doctor about vaccines to prevent some infections, and ask what medicines you should avoid.

Sometimes you don't know what triggers an asthma attack. This is why it is important to have an asthma action plan that tells you what to do during an attack.

References

Healthwise, Incorporated. Asthma in Teens and Adults. Author: Maria G. Essig, MS, ELS. Medical Review: Caroline S. Rhoads, MD (Internal Medicine), Harold S. Nelson, MD (Allergy and Immunology). May 15, 2007.

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