

Asthma: Triggers, symptoms, and treatment options

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In the United States, 14 to 15 million people have asthma, a chronic disease that reduces airflow to the lungs due to inflammation or obstruction of the airway. Asthma typically does not lead to long-term physical effects, but if poorly managed or left untreated it can lead to reduced lung function. Asthma attacks can be very serious and require immediate attention, so it is important for you to know the signs and symptoms of an attack, and the best treatment methods that work for you.

Diagnosis

You may have increased risk of asthma if there is history of the disease in your family. Asthma is diagnosed by a physician based on several factors. Signs and symptoms can range from mild to severe, and are often similar to those of other conditions. Spirometers and Peak Flow Meters are two tools commonly used to measure lung function and aid in diagnosis. The results of a physical exam and test results will enable your physician to diagnosis and prescribe the best treatment option to meet your individual needs.



When monitored appropriately, asthma sufferers can participate in regular sports and activities.

Asthma Triggers

Asthma can be triggered by many different environmental and emotional factors. Some people have only seasonal or occasional symptoms, while others suffer from more chronic symptoms. Allergies may trigger asthma in children, but are less likely to trigger an adult. Knowing what triggers your asthma can help prevent attacks by minimizing or eliminating your exposure to those triggers. Some common asthma triggers include:

- Pollen, dust, mold, and air pollution
- Smoke, from cigarettes, wood burning stoves, campfires, etc.
- Perfumes and aerosol sprays
- Pet dander
- Infections such as colds or sinusitis
- Exercise
- Strong emotions, such as crying, laughing, or fear
- Some medications, such as aspirin or ibuprofen
- Sulfites, a preservative added to some foods

Asthma Symptoms

Asthma attacks are classified as Mild, Moderate, or Severe. It is important to recognize symptoms of an attack so you can seek proper treatment. If your symptoms are getting worse or don't seem to respond as well to your current treatment, speak with your physician. Asthma symptoms include:

- Difficulty breathing (mild, moderate, or severe difficulty)
- Breathing is faster than usual, or much slower and labored

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- Wheezing, coughing, shortness of breath, or tightness in the chest
- Skin color is pale
- “Drawing in” of muscles between ribs, neck, abdomen, and chest is necessary to breathe
- Decreased level of awareness and/or increased drowsiness

Treatment Options

Your physician will assess the severity of your asthma and then prescribe treatment to be taken on a regular or an as-needed basis. Most asthmatics benefit from preventive treatment, because this reduces the inflammation in the airways and the possibility of chronic obstruction. Medications may come in both pill form or inhaled form, and many times prescribed treatment is a combination of the two.

- **Long-term control medications** are used on a regular basis to manage chronic symptoms and prevent attacks. These medications are taken daily.
- **Quick-relief medications** are used for the immediate, short-term relief of symptoms during an attack. Sometimes called “rescue” medications, they are most effective when taken at the first signs of an attack. If your child needs these medications on a frequent basis, notify your physician as this may not be the best treatment for his or her needs.

It is important to have an action plan for getting emergency care quickly in the event of severe asthma symptoms. For children with asthma, it is important to discuss this plan with the child and any adult care-givers including teachers, daycare providers, and coaches. Work with your physician to monitor your symptoms and treatment, and you should be able to participate in normal sports and activities.



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