

What Is Asthma?

Asthma is a chronic lung disease. Currently, there is no cure, but it can be controlled.

- Airway linings become inflamed; that is, they get swollen and secrete extra mucus.
- Airways narrow and breathing becomes difficult. Sometimes the narrowing gets better by itself; often medicine is needed to get the airways open again.
- Airways are super sensitive. They react to many things, such as cigarette smoke, pollen, or cold air. Coughing, wheezing, tightness in the chest, and difficulty breathing may result.

What Are Asthma Symptoms?

- Shortness of breath,
- Wheezing,
- Tightness in the chest, and
- Cough lasting more than a week.

Not all people with asthma wheeze. For some, coughing may be the only symptom of asthma. Coughing often occurs during the night or after exercise.

It's important to know that treatment can reverse asthma symptoms. And it's important to treat even mild symptoms of asthma so that you can keep the symptoms from getting worse.

What Happens During an Asthma Episode (“Attack”)?

- The lining of the airways becomes swollen (inflamed).
- The airways produce a thick mucus.
- The muscles around the airways tighten and make the airways narrower.

These changes in the airways block the flow of air, making it hard to breathe.

It often takes more than one medicine to treat the disease: some medicines relax the airways (bronchodilators) and others reduce (and even prevent) the swelling and excess mucus production (anti-inflammatories).

What Causes Asthma?

The complete cause of asthma is not yet known. Asthma is not caused by psychological factors such as having troubled relationships. It is a chronic lung disease which often occurs in those with close relatives who have asthma or allergies.

People with asthma have airways that are super sensitive to certain things that do not bother other people. These are called triggers --when you are near or come in contact with them, they may set off an asthma episode. Common triggers for asthma episodes include the following:

- Dander (or flakes) from the skin, hair, or feathers of any warm-blooded pets (including dogs, cats, birds, and small rodents)
- House dust mites
- Cockroaches
- Pollens from grass and trees and mold
- Molds (indoor and outdoor)
- Cigarette smoke; wood smoke; scented products such as hair spray, cosmetics, and cleaning products; strong odors from fresh paint or cooking; automobile fumes; and air pollution
- Infections in the upper airway, such as colds
- Exercise
- Strong emotions (crying, fear, laughing, frustration)
- Changes in weather and temperature.
- Reflux or backflow of stomach acid up the esophagus, especially during the night.
- Some medications (e.g. aspirin) and food additives (e.g. sulfites)



What Kind of Asthma Do I Have?

Asthma is categorized by the frequency and severity of the symptoms before treatment.

Mild intermittent: Symptoms occur twice a week or less, and nighttime symptoms come twice a month or less. Symptoms are brief, lasting from a few hours to a few days, of variable intensity, with no symptoms between episodes. Asthma symptoms brought on by exercise are also in this category.

Mild persistent: Symptoms occur more than twice a week but less than daily, and nighttime symptoms come more than twice a month. Some episodes are severe enough to affect daily activities.

Moderate persistent: Symptoms occur daily, with nighttime symptoms more than twice a week. Quick-relief medications are being used daily. Daily activities must be changed due to the asthma. More severe episodes occur twice a week or more and may last for days.

Severe persistent: Frequent severe episodes are occurring with continual daytime and frequent nighttime symptoms. Activities are limited by the symptoms.

How Can Asthma Episodes Be Prevented?

To prevent asthma episodes it is important to work closely with your physician/clinician to:

- Develop a daily self-management plan that keeps you from getting symptoms.
- Plan ways to avoid or reduce contact with your triggers.

How Are Asthma Episodes Controlled?

To control asthma episodes when they occur, you will need to work out a medicine/control plan with your physician/clinician that includes:

- Treating symptoms early,
- Taking appropriate action for any changes in symptoms, and
- Knowing when a health care professional's help is needed and seeking help immediately.

What Can I Expect From Treatment?

With proper treatment most people with asthma will be able to:

- Be active without having symptoms. This includes participating in exercise and sports.
- Sleep through the night without having asthma symptoms.
- Prevent asthma episodes (attacks).
- Have lungs that work well as shown by having the best possible peak flow number (See "Using a Peak Flow Meter")
- Avoid side effects from medicines.

Where Can I Find Out More?

American Lung Association
<http://www.lungusa.org/asthma/>

National Asthma Education Program
http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/lung/asthma/asth_fs.pdf

Asthma Learning Lab
<http://www.asthmalearninglab.com>

