

Asthma

“For the soul of every living thing is in the hand of God, and the breath of all mankind.” (Job 12:10)

Asthma is a chronic lung condition which can make the job of breathing difficult, or even impossible. Most of us take the act of breathing for granted, rarely giving it a thought. However, over 17 million people suffer from asthma in our country, and almost half of these are children. In fact, asthma is the most common chronic disease suffered by children. Asthma tends to run in families, but there is no actual “cause.” While asthma cannot be cured, it can be controlled.

To understand asthma, we must first understand how our lungs work. Air is breathed into our windpipe, and then it divides off into one of the two large tubes (bronchi) that feed our lungs. It then is drawn into increasingly smaller airways throughout the lungs. The oxygen we breathe in crosses through the lining in the smallest of tubes (alveoli), where it is exchanged for carbon dioxide from our blood. The carbon dioxide then is exhaled. As the old saying goes, in with the good (oxygen) and out with the bad (carbon dioxide). It is an amazing process that takes place for most of us with no real effort on our part, but it requires airways that are open and free of thick mucus.

People with asthma have airways that are inflamed. This makes them very sensitive to certain triggers, which cause the airways to swell and become very narrow. Triggers can include dust, pollen, mold, pet dander, dust mites, stress, cigarette smoke, certain foods, exercise, cold air, smoke, infections, certain medications such as aspirin or beta-blockers, and strong odors (including cologne and perfumes). Triggers will vary from one person to another, which is why it is vitally important to see a doctor and learn what an asthmatic person’s triggers are. This is the first step in understanding and controlling this disease.

When someone with asthma is exposed to one of their triggers, three things happen to their lungs:

- Their airways produce thick, sticky mucus
- These airways swell
- The muscles around them tighten, or spasm

When these things happen, breathing can become a real challenge. This is referred to as an asthma attack. Common symptoms of an asthma attack include coughing, tightness in the chest, wheezing, shortness of breath, and faster breathing. Symptoms vary from person to person, and from attack to attack.

Asthma can be diagnosed with some simple tests and allergy testing. An allergist/immunologist is the type of doctor whose **specialty** is treating asthma. There are remarkable drugs and inhalers available today which have greatly increased the quality of life for most asthma patients. People with asthma should have regular checkups with their physicians to keep their condition under control.

Asthma control includes understanding the disease so immediate and proper action can be taken when an attack occurs. An uncontrolled asthma attack is a real emergency, so the goal is to prevent attacks from progressing to that level. Everyone with asthma should carry their “quick relief” inhaler with them at all times. This is used at the first signs of an attack to get it quickly under control. There are other longer acting medications and inhalers that must be taken on a **regular** basis to prevent asthma flare-ups.

Keeping your asthma under control is very basic:

1. Learn about asthma--understand it
2. Take the medications your doctor prescribes
3. Avoid triggers
4. See your doctor regularly

Taking deep breaths of fresh air is pure pleasure! Even people with asthma can enjoy this simple act by educating themselves and working with their doctor to develop a plan designed to prevent attacks and maintain good health.

For further information:

www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/

www.lungusa.org