

# **Asthma**

## **What Is Asthma?**

Asthma is a disease that affects your lungs. It is one of the most common long-term diseases of children, but adults can have asthma, too. Asthma causes wheezing, breathlessness, chest tightness, and coughing at night or early in the morning. If you have asthma, you have it all the time, but you will have asthma attacks only when something bothers your lungs.

In most cases, we don't know what causes asthma, and we don't know how to cure it. We know that if someone in your family has asthma you are more likely to have it.

## **How Can You Tell if You Have Asthma?**

It can be hard to tell if someone has asthma, especially in children under age 5. Having a doctor check how well your lungs work and check for allergies can help you find out if you have asthma.

During a checkup, the doctor will ask if you cough a lot, especially at night, and whether your breathing problems are worse after physical activity or at certain times of year. The doctor will also ask about chest tightness, wheezing, and colds lasting more than 10 days. They will ask whether anyone in your family has or has had asthma, allergies, or other breathing problems, and they will ask questions about your home. The doctor will also ask if you have missed school or work and about any trouble you may have doing certain things.

The doctor will also do a breathing test, called spirometry, to find out how well your lungs are working. The doctor will use a computer with a mouthpiece to test how much air you can breathe out after taking a very deep breath. The spirometer can measure airflow before and after you use asthma medicine.

## **What Is an Asthma Attack?**

An asthma attack may include coughing, chest tightness, wheezing, and trouble breathing. The attack happens in your body's airways, which are the paths that carry air to your lungs. As the air moves through your lungs, the airways become smaller, like the branches of a tree are smaller than the tree trunk. During an asthma attack, the sides of the airways in your lungs swell and the airways shrink. Less air gets in and out of your lungs, and mucous that your body makes clogs up the airways even more.

*You can control your asthma* by knowing the warning signs of an asthma attack, staying away from things that cause an attack, and following your doctor's advice. When you control your asthma:

- you won't have symptoms such as wheezing or coughing,
- you'll sleep better,
- you won't miss work or school,
- you can take part in all physical activities, and
- you won't have to go to the hospital.

### **What Causes an Asthma Attack?**

An asthma attack can happen when you are exposed to "asthma triggers." Your triggers can be very different from those of someone else with asthma. Know your triggers and learn how to avoid them. Watch out for an attack when you can't avoid the triggers. Some of the most common triggers are:

#### **Tobacco Smoke**

Tobacco smoke is unhealthy for everyone, especially people with asthma. If you have asthma and you smoke, quit smoking.

"Secondhand smoke" or "passive smoke" is smoke created by a smoker and breathed in by a second person. Secondhand smoke can trigger an asthma attack. If you have asthma, people should never smoke near you, in your home, in your car, or wherever you may spend a lot of time.

#### **Dust Mites**

Dust mites are tiny bugs that are in almost every home. If you have asthma, dust mites can trigger an asthma attack. To prevent attacks, use mattress covers and pillowcase covers to make a barrier between dust mites and yourself. Don't use down-filled pillows, quilts, or comforters. Remove stuffed animals and clutter from your bedroom. Wash your bedding on the hottest water setting.

#### **Outdoor Air Pollution**

Outdoor air pollution can trigger an asthma attack. This pollution can come from factories, automobiles, and other sources. Pay attention to air quality forecasts on radio, television, and

the Internet and check your newspaper to plan your activities for when air pollution levels will be low.

### **Cockroach Allergen**

Cockroaches and their droppings can trigger an asthma attack. Get rid of cockroaches in your home by removing as many water and food sources as you can. Cockroaches are often found where food is eaten and crumbs are left behind. At least every 2 to 3 days, vacuum or sweep areas that might attract cockroaches. Use roach traps or gels to cut down on the number of cockroaches in your home.

### **Pets**

Furry pets can trigger an asthma attack. If you think a furry pet may be causing attacks, you may want to find the pet another home. If you can't or don't want to find a new home for the pet, keep it out of the person with asthma's bedroom.

Bathe pets every week and keep them outside as much as you can. People with asthma are not allergic to their pet's fur, so trimming the pet's fur will not help your asthma. If you have a furry pet, vacuum often. If your floors have a hard surface, such as wood or tile, damp mop them every week.

### **Mold**

Breathing in mold can trigger an asthma attack. Get rid of mold in your home to help control your attacks. Humidity, the amount of moisture in the air, can make mold grow. Fix water leaks, which let mold grow behind walls and under floors.

### **Smoke From Burning Wood or Grass**

Smoke from burning wood or other plants is made up of a mix of harmful gases and small particles. Breathing in too much of this smoke can cause an asthma attack. If you can, avoid burning wood in your home.

### **Other Triggers**

Infections linked to influenza (flu), colds, and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) can trigger an asthma attack. Sinus infections, allergies, breathing in some chemicals, and acid reflux can also trigger attacks.

Physical exercise; some medicines; bad weather, such as thunderstorms or high humidity; breathing in cold, dry air; and some foods, food additives, and fragrances can also trigger an asthma attack.

Strong emotions can lead to very fast breathing, called hyperventilation, that can also cause an asthma attack.

### **How Is Asthma Treated?**

Control your asthma and avoid an attack by taking your medicine exactly as your doctor tells you and by staying away from things that can trigger an attack.

Everyone with asthma does not take the same medicine. Some medicines can be breathed in, and some can be taken as a pill. Asthma medicines come in two types—quick-relief and long-term control. Quick-relief medicines control the symptoms of an asthma attack. If you need to use your quick-relief medicines more and more, visit your doctor to see if you need a different medicine. Long-term control medicines help you have fewer and milder attacks, but they don't help you while you are having an asthma attack.

Asthma medicines can have side effects, but most side effects are mild and soon go away. Ask your doctor about the side effects of your medicines.

**Remember** – *you can control your asthma*. With your healthcare provider's help, make your own asthma action plan. Decide who should have a copy of your plan and where he or she should keep it. Take your long-term control medicine even when you don't have symptoms.