

What You Should Know About ASTHMA



• TWIN COUNTY •

Regional Healthcare

Where People Care

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WHAT IS ASTHMA?

It's a lung condition that makes breathing difficult. The cause of asthma is not known. However asthma does tend to run in families. It often appears first during childhood. **ASTHMA CAN'T BE CURED, BUT IT CAN BE CONTROLLED.**

WHY SHOULD I LEARN ABOUT ASTHMA?

Asthma affects millions of people. It affects males and females. Chances are, you know someone who has asthma. The overall asthma rate for females is slightly higher than for males, but boys are more likely to have it in childhood. Many people don't know they have asthma. So, it often goes untreated. Treatment is important.

People with asthma can learn to prevent many attacks, recognize warning signs of a coming attack and seek treatment early, when it's most effective.

TAKE A LOOK AT THE RESPIRATORY SYSTEM

Air enters through the nose and/or mouth. It travels through the voice box (larynx) and enters the windpipe (trachea). The windpipe divides into branches. The branches (bronchial tubes) spread throughout the lungs. The branches lead to tiny air sacs. The sacs (alveoli) are surrounded by tiny blood vessels. Oxygen and other gases can pass between the alveoli and the blood vessels. Breathing in brings needed oxygen to the bloodstream. Breathing out allows the body to get rid of waste gas (carbon dioxide) from the blood.

WHEN ASTHMA STRIKES

Here's what happens before, during, and after an attack:

Something triggers an attack. The trigger causes the respiratory system to react. Muscle spasms grip the bronchial tubes. Muscles surrounding the tubes squeeze tight. The tubes become inflamed,

and swelling makes air passages even narrower. The bronchial tubes remain inflamed. In turn, this inflammation makes the lungs more sensitive to triggers --and subject to more asthma attacks. A vicious cycle can develop. Also, mucus production increases which further clogs the bronchial tubes.

ASTHMA CAN MAKE BREATHING DIFFICULT

Narrowing of the airways can make it hard to breathe in or out. Symptoms vary from person to person. An asthma attack can cause a variety of symptoms, including wheezing, shortness of breath, gasping, coughing, and pain or tightness in the chest.

Symptoms may appear suddenly. Spasms in the bronchial tubes may lead to sudden difficulty in breathing. Or, symptoms may occur regularly. Asthma often strikes at night. People with asthma may awaken struggling to breathe. They may have a hard time sleeping because of nighttime attacks. Some people have warning signs of an attack. In the hours or days before an attack, they may notice an itchy throat or chin, coughing or sneezing, a runny nose, fatigue, or slight changes in breathing.

Recognizing warning signs is important. By being aware of these signs, people with asthma can take steps to prevent some attacks and make other attacks less severe.

THERE ARE 4 TYPES OF ASTHMA. Many people with asthma have only “mild intermittent” symptoms. Others have “mild persistent” or “moderate persistent” types of asthma, which cause constant difficulty breathing. A person with “severe persistent” asthma must be extra careful. In rare cases, an asthma attack can be fatal.

As asthma attack occurs after exposure to a certain substance or situation. This is called a trigger. Some common triggers include: Allergens - Allergens are things that people are allergic to. Common allergens include dust and dust mites, mold, pollen, animal dander, and cockroaches and their droppings.

INFECTIONS OF THE RESPIRATORY SYSTEM include colds, flu, sore throats, and other common illnesses. Irritants include tobacco smoke, air pollution, and perfumes. Chemicals used in some workplaces can also trigger asthma. People with asthma can and should exercise -- but only under a health-care provider's direction.

Medications containing aspirin can trigger attacks in some people. Certain other drugs can do the same.

Cold weather or other extremes or changes in the weather can set off an asthma attack.

Emotions do not cause asthma. But, the body's response to stress or excitement may trigger an attack. Triggers vary from person to person.

HOW IS ASTHMA DIAGNOSED?

A physical exam and medical history may provide a picture of the patient's overall health. Lung function tests show how the lungs are working and how they respond to certain treatments. A chest x-ray can reveal other problems that may be causing symptoms. Other tests may also be recommended by your health-care provider. These include blood tests, sputum tests (a study of liquid coughed up from the lungs), and allergy tests, to help identify asthma triggers.

KEEPING ASTHMA UNDER CONTROL

Identify and avoid triggers whenever possible. In some cases, treatment to overcome allergies may help. Control symptoms with medication. This includes drugs that are taken regularly to control lung inflammation and prevent attacks and are used as needed, to open bronchial tubes during an attack. Asthma medication is often inhaled using an inhaler and spacer device, or a nebulizer. Inhaling the medication can increase its effectiveness and reduce side effects. Loved ones and others should also learn about asthma, so they can help during an attack.

People with asthma can use this device to see how well their lungs are working. Changes in lung function give an early warning of an asthma attack.

SOME QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT ASTHMA

1. Is asthma contagious?

No, you cannot get asthma from another person.

2. Can a person with asthma play sports?

Yes! In fact, exercise can be a big part of an asthma treatment program. People with asthma have competed at the highest levels of organized sports. People with asthma need to work closely with a health-care provider to plan a safe exercise program.

3. Don't children usually outgrow asthma?

It is possible for children to outgrow asthma. However, there is no way to be sure this will happen or that the condition won't return. Anyone with asthma symptoms should seek medical help right away. They should not wait for the problem to go away.

4. Does wheezing always mean asthma?

No, wheezing can have many causes besides asthma. In addition, many people with asthma never wheeze at all. If you experience wheezing or any other breathing problem, get help right away.

5. How does secondhand smoke affect people with asthma?

Smoke of any kind is a common trigger for asthma attacks. People with asthma should stay away from known irritants -- including tobacco smoke of all kinds.

6. What's the long-term outlook for people with asthma?

With proper treatment and monitoring, the outlook is excellent. Most people with asthma can control their symptoms and prevent many attacks. New drugs and treatments have fewer side effects, even when taken over long periods.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Your healthcard provider is a good source of information about asthma and other health issues.

The American Lung Association
1-800-LUNG-USA (1-800-586-4872)

National Asthma Education and Prevention Program
NJLBI Information Center
P.O. Box 30105
Bethesda, MD 20824-0105

The Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America
1125 15th St. NW, Suite 502
Washington, DC 20005
1-800-7-ASTHMA (1-800-727-8462)

HELP KEEP ASTHMA UNDER CONTROL!

- Find out all you can about asthma.
- See your health care provider if you show any signs of asthma.
- Remember that asthma can be controlled with proper treatment and monitoring

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