

Controlling Asthma

What is asthma?

Asthma is a disease that affects the lungs. Asthma causes repeated episodes of wheezing, breathlessness, a feeling of tightness in the chest, and nighttime or early morning coughing.

Asthma can be controlled by knowing the warning signs of an attack, staying away from things that trigger the attack, and following the advice of your health-care provider. With controlled asthma, the patient won't have symptoms like wheezing or coughing. Patients sleep better, miss less work or school, and can take part in physical activity. Patients with controlled asthma also experience fewer visits to the hospital emergency room.

How is asthma diagnosed?

During a checkup the health-care provider will ask questions about the frequency of coughing, especially at night, and breathing problems that are worse after physical activity or during a particular time of year. Health-care providers also ask about other symptoms such as chest tightness, wheezing, and colds that last more than 10 days. They may ask whether family members have or have had asthma, allergies, or other breathing problems, and they will ask questions about your home environment.

What is an "asthma attack"?

An asthma attack happens in the airways to the lungs. As air moves through the 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 swell (so the hollow inside of the tube shrinks). Less air gets in and out of the lungs, and mucus clogs up the airways even more. The attack may include coughing, chest tightness, wheezing, and trouble breathing.

What causes an asthma attack?

An asthma attack can be caused by exposure to elements in the environment such as house dust mites and tobacco smoke. These are called asthma triggers. Some of the most important triggers are outdoor air pollution, cockroach allergen, pet dander, mold, and physical exercise.

How is asthma treated?

Asthma can be controlled by taking medication exactly as prescribed and by avoiding asthma "triggers."

There are different forms of asthma medication. Some medicines can be inhaled, or 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. Patients who rely on quick-relief medicine more and more often should visit their health-care provider. Maybe it is time to consider a different medicine that will work better. Long-term control medicines promote fewer and milder attacks, but they don't help during an asthma attack.

It is suggested that people with asthma work with their health-care provider to create an asthma management plan. The plan will outline symptoms and triggers and give instructions for the actions necessary during an attack. Asthma patients should keep their Asthma Action Plan handy at all times and decide who else should have a copy.

For more information on asthma please visit:

<http://www.cdc.gov/asthma/default.htm>

<http://www.lungusa.org/site/apps/s/content.aspx=dlvLUK900E&b=34706&ct=67496>