

Asthma

When airway inflammation makes it hard to breathe

What is it?

Asthma is a long-term disease involving inflammation of the airways. During an asthma attack, the airways become narrowed (“bronchospasm”), making it difficult to breathe. This is reversible and goes away after the end of the asthma attack.

Who gets asthma?

Asthma affects around 10% of the Canadian population. It is sometimes possible for children with asthma to “grow out of it” by adulthood. During childhood, asthma is more common in boys, but by adulthood, it is more common in women than men.

What causes asthma?

Asthma is caused by both genetic and environmental factors.

Risk factors for developing asthma include:

- Family history of asthma
- Personal history of eczema or allergic rhinitis (hay fever)
- Obesity
- Exposure to air pollution
- Mom’s exposure to smoke (cigarettes or marijuana) during pregnancy
- Exposure to smoke during childhood

What will it do to me?

Asthma attacks

Symptoms of an asthma attack include:

- Wheezing
- Coughing
- Chest tightness
- Shortness of breath

Common triggers for an attack include:

- Exercise
- Allergies (e.g. to pets, dust, and mold)
- Respiratory infections (e.g. a cold)
- Higher levels of stress
- Some medications, including Aspirin
- Exposure to chemicals that irritate the airways (e.g. smoke or perfumes)

Long-term effects of asthma

Quality of life: *Poorly controlled asthma* can be disruptive to your life. It may cause you to miss work, school, or family/social events. It can also put you at higher risk of experiencing anxiety and depression.

Lung problems: *Poorly controlled asthma* means there is ongoing inflammation of your airways. This can put you at higher risk of later developing other lung problems. This is why it is important to keep asthma well-controlled from the start.

What can I do?

Although asthma is not curable, there are many ways to keep it under control. Most people with asthma live normal and active lives, with the help of lifestyle changes and medications.

Lifestyle modification

The #1 thing you can do to manage your asthma is to avoid triggers such as smoke (including second-hand smoke), perfume, air pollution, and allergens such as pets and dust.

However, you do not need to avoid exercise, as research has shown that it has benefits – just be sure to keep your inhaler with you if exercise is a trigger.

Fast-acting (relief) medications

These act immediately as “rescue” during an asthma attack. They should not be used to replace your long-acting medications (see below). Examples of rescue medications include Ventolin and Atrovent.

Long-acting (control) medications

These reduce inflammation and lower your risk of having an asthma attack. It is important to remember to take them as directed! Examples include Symbicort and Flovent.

Still have questions? Ask us @ teachandlearnfm.com

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Patient-doctor learning area: Use this area to write down questions for your doctor or use it as a space for your doctor to answer your questions.



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