

Spotlight on Health

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Symptoms

Symptoms can occur each time the airways are irritated.

Common symptoms include:

- > **Coughing-often worse at night or early morning making sleep difficult**
- > **Wheezing-a whistling or squeaky sound that occurs when you breathe**
- > **Chest tightness**
- > **Shortness of breath**

Not all people who have asthma have these symptoms, likewise having these symptoms does not mean someone has asthma.

Severe symptoms can be life threatening; it is important to treat symptoms when they are first noticed so they do not worsen.

What triggers asthma symptoms to occur?

Asthma is different for each person, but some of the more common triggers are exposure to *allergens* found in dust, mold, animal fur, cockroaches, and *pollens* from trees, grasses or flowers. *Irritants* such as cigarette smoke, compounds in home décor products and sprays, air pollution and chemicals in the workplace also act as triggers. Certain medicines, sulfites in food or drinks, viral upper respiratory infections and even exercise and weather can cause asthma to flare up.

Asthma



Asthma affects people of all ages, but it most often begins in childhood. In the US, more

than 22 million people are known to have asthma. There is no cure for asthma. Today however, with current knowledge and treatment options, most people with asthma are able to manage their disease with few, if any, symptoms.

What is asthma?

Asthma is a chronic lung disease that inflames and narrows the airways (tubes that carry air in and out of your lungs). Inflamed airways are swollen, very sensitive, and react strongly to certain substances that are breathed in. When airways react, muscles around them tighten, causing them to narrow and less air flows to the lungs. Cells in the airways may make more mucous than normal which can further narrow the airways. This chain of events can cause symptoms of an asthma 'attack' or 'episode.'

What causes asthma?

The exact cause of asthma isn't known. Scientists believe that a combination of factors interact to cause asthma to develop, most often early in life. These factors include:

- Parents who have asthma
- An inherited tendency to develop allergies (called atopy)

- Certain respiratory infections in infancy or childhood /or exposure to some airborne allergens when the immune system is developing.

For example, if asthma or atopy run in your family, exposure to airborne allergens (like dust mites, cockroaches, pet dander) and/or irritants (like tobacco smoke) may make your airways more reactive to substances in the air you breathe.

Some people develop asthma because of exposure to certain irritants or industrial dusts in the workplace. This is known as *occupational asthma*.

How is asthma diagnosed?

Your primary care doctor will diagnose asthma based on your medical history, physical exam and results from tests. A lung functioning test called a *spirometry* is used to check how your lungs are working. Your primary care doctor will also determine your level of asthma severity: intermittent, mild, moderate or severe. Your severity level will determine the best course of treatment for you.

Treatment of Asthma

Asthma treatment and control is individualized for the patient. Your doctor will help you to develop an asthma action plan. Generally, asthma is treated with two types of medications: long term control and quick-relief medicines. Although there is no cure for asthma, most individuals, with proper treatment, can lead normal lives.